

C3 XIII

—シーキューブ—
CubexCursedxCurious

水瀬葉月
Illustration せもりがため

電撃文庫





C³ シーキューブ・XIII

水瀬葉月

電撃文庫
⊕
630

C³ -シーキューブ-XIII

ン・イゾイーと一緒に銭湯で肌色祭り！
飲んではいけないアレを飲んでしまって
乱れるこのは！ 《ふれあいわんにゃん
パーク》で白穂が春亮とデート!? そし
てフィアが迎える初めての雪の日！

「電撃文庫MAGAZINE」に掲載された
4編のほか、書き下ろしではやたらと変
態的な偽春亮が登場？

フィアや春亮たちの、本編では見られ
ない日常の合間のおもしろエピソードが
満載。大ボリュームでお届けする短編集
第2弾！

いつもより笑いとハレンチ成分も増量
なのです！



-シーキューブ-
Cub×Curse×Curious

XIII

水瀬葉月
Illustration さそりがため

電撃文庫



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みなせ はづき

水瀬葉月

写真はアフレコ台本を見てニヤニヤしている作者の図。
この本が出るころには、もうC3のアニメも後半戦に
突入しているはず……なんか名残惜しいですね。しか
しアニメが終わっても原作はまだしばらく続きます！
引き続きお付き合いいただけると幸いー。

【電撃文庫作品】

結界師のフーガ1～3

ほくと魔女式アポカリプス1～3

C³・シーキューブ・I～XIII

藍坂素敵な症候群 1～3

イラスト:さそりがため

アニメのフィアが可愛すぎてニヤニヤしながら鑑賞していま
す。モチロン、お茶請けのお煎餅とほうじ茶をおともに！

C u b e × C u r s e d × C u r i o u s

CubexCursedxCurious

水瀬葉月

Illustration さそりがため



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—シーキューブ—
CubexCursedxCurious
XIII

CubexCursedxCurious

C u b e × C u r s e d × C u r i o u s

C u b e × C u r s e d × C u r i o u s

An anime-style illustration of three young women in a bathhouse. The woman on the left has long, flowing blue hair and is looking towards the center. The woman in the middle has short orange hair and is looking down. The woman on the right has long, flowing grey hair and is looking towards the center. They are all wearing swimsuits. The background shows a tiled wall and a bathtub.

裸祭りの会場は
こちらですか!?

「是非自分もやるべき
だという判断を判断します。
背中の中の流しつこというものを」

Scene01:湯けむりに消えたヌポワ

Scene02:妖刀村正血風録

「のう、はりゅめきん……
お主は、わかめ酒、というものを
知っておるかえ……う」

「このは、覚醒——
（ある意味で）」



「見ての通り
私達はカップルです。
参加させてください」

春亮と白穂のデート!?!
ところにより
血の雨が降るでしょう……。

Scene03:びゅーてい・あんど・ざ・びーすと?
～桜参白穂、狂奔する～

「よいせ、よいせつ。
より美しく、より大きく。
育ててやるぞおー」

初めての雪の目。フィアはそのとき……

Scene04:スノウメルトの人口密度



「な、なあ。黙ってないで
なんとか言え、春亮。
私達は、どうすれば……」

偽春亮登場!?
その実体とははたして……。

Scene05: 汝は春亮なりや?
-Imitation of Life-

A blue-haired anime girl with long, flowing hair and purple eyes is shown from the waist up. She is wearing a blue and white horizontally striped bikini. She is posing seductively, with one hand near her face and the other near her hip. The background is a soft, pinkish-purple gradient with some ruffled fabric visible at the top.

今回の短編集も、

お馴染みの面々のコミカルな日常や

いつもとはちょっと違う姿や

いつも以上にハレンチな模様が満載!

ぜひ堪能してください!

C u b e × C u r s e d × C u r i o u s



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シーキューブ
Cube x Cursed x Curious

XIII

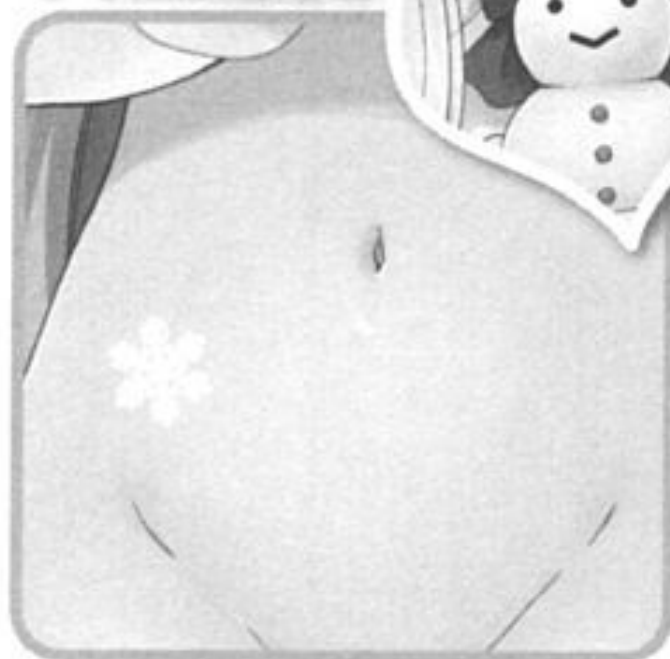
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C u b e × C u r s e d × C u r i o u s



スノウメルトの
人口密度



C u b e × C u r s e d × C u r i o u s

C u b e × C u r s e d × C u r i o u s



汝は春亮なりや?
- Imitation of Life



C u b e × C u r s e d × C u r i o u s

C u b e × C u r s e d × C u r i o u s



湯けむりに消えた
ヌポワ



C u b e × C u r s e d × C u r i o u s

Chapter 1 - Nubowa Disappearing in the Steam

Part 1

One afternoon, on the last day of the winter break, Haruaki was walking in the streets with Fear and Konoha while shivering from the chilly wind. They were simply going grocery shopping as usual, so Kuroe stayed back to watch the house. Haruaki could understand that Konoha was accompanying him to help carry the shopping, but he found it quite incredible for Fear to be crawling out of the kotatsu^[1] to follow him outdoors. He was thinking she would surely choose to stay behind with Kuroe to watch the house within its warm comfort.

Thinking over these things, Haruaki glanced at the silver-haired head beside him. Hence—

"Muu~ ...So cold! That's all!"

"Why are you suddenly complaining about the cold?"

Seeming a little displeased, Fear looked back at Haruaki.

"I just can't help but confirm again if there really is nothing besides the cold! Since we're done to the last day of the winter break, I only came out with you because it didn't seem right to spend all day under the kotatsu, doing nothing productive... It'd be nice if at least one amusing thing happens!"

"By this juncture, what are you talking about? We are simply going shopping for groceries. How could something amusing possibly happen?"

Konoha remarked in exasperation. The displeasure on Fear's face intensified.

"Hmph. To think you're satisfied with squandering precious time idly, I am filled with disbelief... But it's only natural that you can't understand. After all, considering a insensitive woman who normally keeps two shameless pieces of meat hanging there nonchalantly, it comes as no surprise that you are unable to understand my delicate feelings about enjoying the last moments of the vacation."

"Who is an insensitive woman!?"

"You, of course! You! Your dual meatbags are always annoyingly occupying our view. You've no idea how much displeasure and eye cancer they bring to Kuroe and I on a daily basis...! There's no woman more troubling and insensitive than you!"

Listening to the usual squabbling, Haruaki smiled faintly. Yes, after all, seeing as it was the final day of the precious winter break, spending it idly would be too much of a shame. This feeling was not impossible for him to understand.

"But something amusing isn't going to happen so easily, right... But I guess it can't be helped, let's head over to check out the supermarket in front of the train station today. Consider a stroll. It'll feel more refreshing than the one we always visit."

"Oh! That's a great idea. Just the fact we're visiting some place different from usual already makes me look forward to it. The supermarket might very well sell rice crackers I've never seen before!"

"That's enough to satisfy you...? On the other hand, I don't really mind. But since we're walking to a farther supermarket because of you, it's only fair that you carry a greater share of the groceries in exchange."

"No problem, that's totally trivial! Since it's decided, let's set off quickly! Rice crackers I've never seen before, wait for me—!"

Fear greatly quickened her pace. Haruaki and Konoha exchanged glances and smiled wryly.

"Sorry Konoha for adding to your troubles."

"Oh, I'm completely fine with it~ It is true that there's nothing to do if we return home too early. After all, we're just taking a stroll while going shopping. However, I do foresee that on the way back, that child will be yelling 'so boring!' with a face filled with discontent."

"It's very likely. Speaking of which, since so much happened during Christmas and New Year's, I actually find this winter break rather turbulent and eventful... Didn't she have enough fun already?"

"Very well said. In any case, let us focus on enjoying a leisurely stroll first."

As indicated by this dialogue, Haruaki and Konoha were following leisurely after Fear. No need to rush. Just enjoy the stroll. Indeed, it was nothing

more than a decision to visit a supermarket different from the usual, a special situation could not possibly arise that easily—

That was what Haruaki originally believed.

Several minutes later, Haruaki, Konoha and Fear stopped walking. This was when turning a corner near the train station.

A girl with extremely striking characteristics was walking towards them from the opposite direction. Only after a few seconds did the girl notice them and stop. Then slightly tilting her head, she said:

"My thoughts: giving statement of what a coincidence. I greet with a greeting of happy new year."

"Un Izoey... Hmph. Too many things happened so I almost forgot, but you're still staying in this town, so running into you isn't that weird."

Fear grumbled with her arms crossed. Probably a reflexive reaction, Konoha slightly frowned upon seeing Un Izoey. However, she quickly shook her head with a light sigh, thereby relieving and dissipating the sense of tension she was about to exude.

Originating from Africa, Un Izoey was a member of the organization, «Lab Chief Yamimagari Pakuaki's Nation». Since her first appearance was as an adversary, reacting to her reflexively in wariness was only natural. Nevertheless, due to many things happening during Christmas, Haruaki's group had already reached a common understanding that she was not a bad person at heart.

"So, what are you doing?"

"My answer: preparations for living here from now on. Because many things need to be bought."

Un Izoey answered with her usual expressionless face. Fear went as far as to examine her from head to foot and said:

"That's right, things will get very busy starting tomorrow. I guess it's not strange for you to be out shopping... But I'm asking about something else."

"Something else?"

"BA~SIC~ALLY~, what's with that appearance!?"

Dark-skinned complexion, gray-colored hair of uneven length, lab coat with her navel exposed, tribal skirt with slit offering glimpses of her thigh, and of course, bare feet at the bottom... She was dressed the same as always. However, there was something different from her usual appearance as well. First of all, she was holding a cloth-wrapped bundle in front of her chest, probably containing her shopping inside. But more concerning that that was—

"Umm, why... are you dirty all over?"

"...?"

As though realizing only after Haruaki pointed it out, Un Izoey looked down at her body. She was very obviously dirty. Stuck to her skirt were what appeared to be fragments of paper, the lab coat was creased and stained, her gray hair was ruffled even more than usual, her face also had black stains resembling chimney ash.

"I don't suppose you were attacked again? I really don't want another commotion like last time."

"My answer: no. These are just ordinary stains, I explain with this kind of explanation."

"Ordinary stains huh...? But I'm glad you weren't attacked."

Looking at the unkempt Un Izoey, Fear cocked her head and muttered quietly. Haruaki suddenly realized that they were not the only people casting doubtful gazes at Un Izoey. He had almost forgotten but this place was close to the shopping street in front of the station. In other words, there were many pedestrians. This girl was already quite striking in appearance to begin with, but combined with her unnatural state of filthiness right now, she had become the center of attention. "What's with that person?" "She's barefooted, is she one of the homeless?" "An illegal immigrant, right? Should I call the police?" The voices of passersby could be heard automatically. Every time Fear and Konoha heard someone speak, they would glare angrily at the rude pedestrian and drive them away. However, the girl in question, Un Izoey herself, did not seem to mind at all.

"I am relieved, since you all understand, it is most fortunate. I take my leave."

"No, wait!"

Un Izoey bowed her head lightly to say goodbye. Just as she was about to start walking, Fear frantically called to her.

"Is there something?"

"Muu~ ...No, nothing at all, but even so... Do you live far from here?"

"My answer: quite some distance. Needs quite a walk."

"Really? Well... Hmm..."

What should we do? Fear made a troubled expression. She kept glancing at Un Izoey, looking as though she wanted to say something. While engaged in an internal argument with herself, passing pedestrians were eyeing Un Izoey rudely, prompting Fear to make threatening movements to vent her anger and drive them away. This repeated itself many times—

"Excuse me~"

"Jeez, what the heck!? I'm very busy right now and this country girl isn't a display object... Oh, I was thinking you were someone else."

"Wah! It really is Fear-chan and you guys~! What are you doing here?"

The one who had called out to them was Sovereignty. She was currently employed as the superintendent's secretary's assistant-in-training. Often dressed as a maid, she was currently in casual clothing. Wearing pants, she was sporting a more boyish look while a friendly smile was hanging on her face as usual.

"Oh my, Sovereignty-san... Shiraho-san isn't accompanying you?"

"She's staying home because she caught a bit of a cold~ I'm out shopping today by myself."

"Really? This might very well be because she was forced to do too many things during New Year's... When you get home, please pass my apologies to her."

"Ahaha~ Got it! So... Uh, who might this be?"

Sovereignty finally noticed Un Izoey's existence and repeatedly blinked many times. Un Izoey also looked at Sovereignty in turn.

"...I recall: you are the «Sovereignty-Perfection-Doll». The Lab Chief and Sekaibashi Gabriel have both mentioned your existence to me. Already a known fact."

"Oh I remember now! Speaking of which, the superintendent and Zenon-san also told me. You'll be one of our school's students starting the third term, right? Uh, your name is U-Un~...?"

"My name: Un Izoey."

"Y-Yes, I'll remember it, of course! Un-chan, Un-chan!"

Sovereignty scratched her head and smiled courteously. Although it was none of his business, Haruaki remarked to himself that this nickname was like a tongue-twister.

"By the way, you're dirty all over. Are you okay?"

"My answer: no problem."

"Of course there's a problem! Since you're a girl, you must pay more attention to keeping your appearance presentable~ Today my horoscope said that my lucky action is 'treating others with kindness' so leave it to me! Be patient while I get on it, handkerchief, handkerchief~"

Sovereignty began to use her handkerchief to wipe Un Izoey's face. This action of hers seemed to serve as the final push to settle the internal struggle in Fear's heart.

"Hmm... Since Sovereignty wants to do this, it can't be helped. Yes, there's really no other choice. I'll help too."

While muttering these token words, Fear began to flutter and wave Un Izoey's lab coat. Sighing in exasperation, Konoha also joined. For an instant, Haruaki felt the impulse to help but as a boy, he decided that it was not quite appropriate for him to pull at a girl's skirt or clothing. Hence, he stood on the side to watch them for now.

"Hmm~ This is so hard to wipe clean. There's a limit to how much a handkerchief can do on its own..."

"Just wipe it roughly. I suggest this kind of suggestion."

Letting the girls do with her however they wished, Un Izoey spoke with vacant eyes. However, Sovereignty persisted without giving up, continuing

with her task and saying: "That just won't do~" But in the end, she still could not manage to wipe all the stains from Un Izoey's face. "Muu~" Sovereignty's mouth curved upwards into a frown. After staring a while at the stains, Sovereignty finally looked up as though she was struck by an idea.

"Oh right! Hey hey, Haruaki-kun, are you guys free for the next while?"

"Eh? Yeah, I guess... We only walked all the way here so as to kill some time."

"Then it's perfect! I discovered a great place earlier when I was shopping and really wanted to go in for a look. Then let's go together!"

"I don't really get what you're talking about, but continuing to idle here would only attract people's stares... I don't mind at all. So, where are we going?"

Great question! Exuding an aura that seemed to say that, Sovereignty puffed out her chest and answered Fear's question.

"I'll say it directly... A public bath!"

Part 2

The building looked like a relic that was somehow left behind by the passage of time. That said, neither was it made of wood nor was it covered in vines and creepers. Although not to the point of crumbling, the building was quite old and worn, a concrete structure with a long history. Neither small nor large, the building was equipped with a long chimney protruding from the top. With nothing attention-grabbing about it, simply stated, it was just "an ordinary bath house from the past." But these girls, who were seeing a public bath for the first time, probably found everything quite new and refreshing.

Fear looked up at the ♨ logo on the door curtain hanging in front of the establishment and went "wow~" in admiration.

"So this is a bath house!? I've seen them on television before. So they really do exist!"

"How nostalgic. There used to be many more of these."

"My question: asking what is a bath house. Truly an unknown."

"Ah~ Basically... a public bath. After paying, everyone can get a soak together in a giant tub."

"I see. The unknown is now known."

Un Izoey nodded repeatedly. Hailing from a faraway and foreign country, she was unclear on Japan's common knowledge, on a level rivaling Fear's.

Just at this time, a noise was heard from behind, the place opposite the bath house. Turning around, they found a shopkeeper emerging from behind an oden stall.

"Ohoh, isn't this Konoha-chan? You're all visiting the bath house?"

"Yes, mister oden seller. It's really been a while."

This is the shopkeeper who occasionally brought his stall to the shopping street—Konoha quietly explained to the rest of the group. She probably met him during her part-time job at the bookstore.

"Are you here for business today?"

"Yeah! This spot is pretty good for business, actually. Having some piping hot oden after a bath, followed by a hearty drink... Doesn't that feel great? If it's okay with you guys, Konoha-chan, come have a drink or two!"

"No... Umm... We're still minors and can't drink heartily yet..."

Konoha smiled tactfully and answered. Nodding lightly to express her apologies, she ended the conversation with the oden stall owner. Then in a slightly wistful tone of voice, she whispered: "A drink after a bath... That really does sound like quite a treat." However, Haruaki decided to pretend he had not heard her.

Then Sovereignty, her eyes glimmering brightly just like Fear's as they looked at the door curtain, took a bouncy step forward. Turning her head lightly, she looked back at Haruaki's group.

"So, let's go in and check it out? They probably rent out towels inside, right?"

"Hmm... Sounds like a plan. Konoha?"

"Yes, I have a feeling that a certain person who keeps whining 'so boring' will finally be happy. Also, having a leisurely bath on the last day to end the winter vacation might be a good idea after all."

"What? You're talking about me? But it's true, I've never experienced this activity before so I've no objections. Plus this place will allow us to scrub the stains off this girl, right? It's not like I want to have a good time with this country girl—This is more like finding a filthy stray cat on the side of the road and giving it a bath! Yes, stray cat, let's go!"

"...? I insist that I am not paruki..."

"Stop talking nonsense, go, go—!"

Pushing the puzzled Un Izoey, Fear and Sovereignty went through the door curtain and entered the bath house. Haruaki and Konoha also followed.

The instant they pushed open the glass door, they were struck by the fragrance of soap. As soon as they entered, they were presented with a resting area that resembled a lobby. The group took off their shoes at the limestone entryway and stepped into the resting area.

The lobby was quite spacious and appropriately equipped with vending machines, tables, coin-operated massage chairs and other facilities. Several customers were already sitting in the resting chairs and massage chairs, relaxing to their hearts' content.

"Hey hey Haruaki, where's that legendary thingy!?"

"What thingy?"

"Of course I'm talking about the coffee milk and the fruit-flavored milk! I heard that they're the most yummy drinks in the world, aren't they!?"

"You're getting ahead of yourself! They taste good after you finish taking a bath, of course!"

Fear was not the only one looking around the bath house inquisitively. Sovereignty and Un Izoey were also doing the same.

"Wow~ So nice, my body and mind are both relaxing~ I'm really looking forward to bathing with everyone!"

"Paying money specifically to bath with others... A bit hard to understand. Can this be considered a business? I doubtfully raise this doubt. What about during the summer...? If everyone jumps into the river for a bath, that does seem quite nice."

At the far end of the lobby, the entrances to two passageways were covered by a curtain each, red and blue respectively. Presumably, these passages led to the doors of the changing rooms. Between the two passageways was a protruding spot. In other words, flanked by the red and blue curtains, there was a service counter. Sitting on a chair, a figurine resembling an old woman... No, correction, a wrinkly old lady was sitting on the chair, not moving at all.

"Umm~ ...We have a total of four girls and one boy here... Excuse me?"

The figurine remained silent. Also, it was not possible to see if the old woman's eyes were opened or closed. Fortunately, the corner of her lips seemed to wiggle a little, otherwise, to be honest, Haruaki was beginning to suspect that the old woman had already passed away.

What kind of business lets an old woman, hard of hearing and with bad eyesight, to tend to customers—Just as Haruaki was thinking that, he examined the counter closely and instantly received the answer to his question. Placed on the counter was a receptacle resembling a mini offering box. On it was written a price list for the bath's entrance fee and towel rentals.

"Self service huh...? What a peaceful bath house this must be~"

Haruaki muttered quietly, counted out the bathing and towel fees for five people then tossed the money into the payment box. Then picking up the clean towels piled on the shelves next to the counter, everything was ready.

"Then let's take a bath first. Since we're here already, don't worry about the time and enjoy a good long soak."

"Yeah. No wait, Haruaki, I'll say this first, just in case... No peeking. I can tell that this is the kind of place where your shameless qualities shine best!"

"Seconded! In other words, I must raise levels to the maximum for both preventive and punitive measures against Haruaki-kun's immoral behavior. Just as a precaution, you would do best to prepare yourself well!"

Fear warily threw a vicious glare at Haruaki while Konoha smiled in a horrifying manner.

"I'm not going to peek, okay!? Jeez... Then I'll be going that way. Fear, don't make too much noise. Keep in mind that there are other customers around."

"Got it, sheesh, stop looking down on me! I'll curse you!"

It was probably okay to leave Un Izoey to the girls. Then I'll go ahead and enjoy a leisurely bath—Hence, Haruaki went through the curtain leading to the male bath.

In the instant he parted ways with Fear and the girls, he saw Sovereignty with her head tilted, murmuring to herself: "Oh, that's how it goes? So it turns out to be this kind of layout~..." Unable to figure out the meaning of her words, Haruaki did not take particular note of them.

Part 3

Holding the rented bath towel in one hand, Fear passed through the red curtain to enter the changing room for the female bath. The fragrance of soap grew even stronger. Carrying a sense of cleanliness and refreshing coolness, it was a most nostalgic fragrance. This alone was enough to make Fear start feeling elated.

What was in the changing room? Fear looked all around, seeing the shelves where wicker baskets were arranged in rows, the sinks that came with large mirrors, electrical fans, hair dryers, paper cups and a drinking fountain. The little door in a corner probably belonged to the toilet.

"Hmm hmm, I see... So the clothes go into this basket once I take them off."

"Don't throw them around randomly, because other people need to use them."

"I've had enough of all this nagging from you and the shameless brat! There's clearly a girl here with even less common sense than me, so go remind her, okay!?"

What a long-winded and nagging woman—Fear pouted and removed her clothing one piece at a time.

"Personal belongings are placed here? I ask this kind of question."

"Indeed. Also, I shouldn't have to say this but you're not allowed to bring anything with you into there apart from your bath towel. Please leave all dangerous articles here. So long as you don't go out of line, we intend to get along with you peacefully."

"...Affirmative. I have no intention of being enemies with you at all."

Un Izoey nodded and placed the bundle of cloth in her arms into one of the wicker baskets, then began to strip. First she unbuttoned her navel-exposing lab coat, one button at a time. Despite the weather being this cold, she was wearing just this one article of clothing on her upper body? The dark-skinned bulging under her lab coat was exposed, exhibiting its abundant elasticity. At the same time, Konoha was also removing her clothing. As soon as her bra was unclasped, a certain body part, exhibiting abundant elasticity, also came into view—

"Damn it, you two, are you taunting the Ladylike Bosoms Alliance!? Speaking of dangerous articles, those things of yours are actually the most dangerous, too dangerous! Hurry and put them down, I'll hold on to them for you two! Or rather... Uh, dismantle them!"

"?"

"Don't mind that child's words. This is just someone sulking because they have no breasts."

The opposing faction's core leadership effortlessly dismissed Fear's protests with merely two sentences. So infuriating!

Immediately, Un Izoey proceeded to bend over and took off the bow-like elastic cord from her left toe, coiling it into a mass. Then with her tribal skirt taken off, the curves belonging to a pair of long, slender, beautiful, dark-skinned legs were revealed. Casually throwing her long skirt into a basket, this produced a crisp clink from the holster in her skirt that probably carried either darts or throwing knives. Finally, she pulled off her underwear that was extremely small in area, buried deeply between the cheeks of her buttocks. Separating it from her legs, her task of undressing was then complete.

Almost simultaneously, Fear also took off all her clothes.

"So, the bath is behind that glass door... Hmm? Sovereignty, what's with you?"

Fear turned her head to see that Sovereignty had not undressed. She looked quite hesitant and was acting awkwardly. But after hearing Fear's question, she seemed to be committing herself to some unknown decision. Laughing "ehehe," she said:

"Uh... I just remembered I've got a little something to do first!"

"Going to the toilet? If that's the case, I think the toilet is that door over there..."

"No, it's not the toilet—Anyway, don't mind me, you girls enter the bath first! Sorry!"

"Sure... Okay. Then we'll go in first."

Leaving Sovereignty behind, Fear pulled the glass door open with a clack and entered the bath area. The interior was filled with steam and hot air. Fear also found the patter of her own footsteps on the floor quite pleasant and relaxing.

"Wow—It's just like what I saw on television, this is what a bath house is like! So big, so many taps, the tile patterns are so pretty and we've got the whole place to ourselves!"

"As said previously, don't make so much noise! It's highly likely that others will come in after us. And if you're too loud, the male side of the bath can hear it too!"

Fear completely ignored Konoha's reminders and continued advancing. Wooden buckets and bath stools were piled in a small hill. Why was there a mirror installed at each rinsing station? Hmm, how curious—just as Fear thought that, she heard a tragic scream of "Hyawah—!?" accompanied by the sounds of impacts from the changing room direction. Sovereignty's usual clumsiness had probably asserted itself again, causing her to fall over somewhere despite a lack of obstacles on the ground. Although Fear had no idea what happened to her, she really hoped that Sovereignty could join them as soon as possible.

"So, with no further delays, I'll confirm for myself what it's like to take a dip in this massive bath—"

"Hold on! You must rinse yourself first! There are also many other rules I have to tell you, such as not soaking your towel into the bath. Since we're

bathing together, I will teach you bath house etiquette strictly. Opposition is not permitted...!"

"Muu~ This girl is such a pain."

"This is manners, so you must adhere to the rules! The same goes for you—Eh? What's the matter?"

At first, Un Izoey was also looking around with great curiosity, but now, she was staring intently at the spacious bath tub, not moving at all. Judging from her gaze, she seemed to be wary of something, keeping a certain distance without approaching the bath a single step further. What was going on? Just as Fear wondered, Un Izoey spoke up.

"So this is a bath house... We are supposed to take a dip in that pool-like place? A vast pool with steam rising—It reminds me of the Shikakinira cave in my homeland."

"Oh my, you have hot springs back in your homeland too? That's quite nice."

"My answer: assertion that it's not nice at all."

"Why?"

Still eyeing the bath warily, Un Izoey replied with a face that could not be more serious:

"...Rumors say that you'll die if you go near that place. Because poisonous gases surface once a while."

Part 4

Immersed up to his shoulders in the spacious bath, Haruaki slowly exhaled "phew~" The mildly hot water, stimulating his skin, felt extremely comfortable.

"It's been so long since I last visited a bath house... Ah! This really allows me to relax my entire body..."

Apart from Haruaki, there were no other customers in the male bath, resulting in a situation where he could monopolize the entire place. Although he only ended up here as a result of all sorts of simultaneous coincidences, it turned out to be more leisurely and relaxing than expected.

Haruaki wondered if he should be thanking Sovereignty and Un Izoey instead.

Just at this time, noises could be heard from the female side of the bath. Although he had already warned Fear not to be too loud, this bath house's structure was the same as others in the past—the top part of the separating wall between the male and female sides was hollow. Hence, hearing noises from the other side was only natural. However, he next heard Konoha say: "J-Just relax! You won't die!" This came totally out of the blue and made him extremely curious. What exactly was happening over on the female side of the bath?

At this moment, he heard the male bath's glass door grating as it was pulled open. Another customer was coming in apparently. Deciding it would be bad if he were mistaken for eavesdropping on the female bath, Haruaki pulled his gaze back away from the partitioning wall, closed his eyes, and focused on carefully savoring the hot water's temperature.

He could hear the new visitor using the rinsing facilities, pouring hot water into a wooden bucket. Then new waves were made in the bath tub where Haruaki was immersed.

"Uwah, so hot~ It hurts~"

"It'll be fine once you get used to it. Besides, it won't feel like a bath house unless it's this hot. Because Japanese people love to enjoy a good soak in hot water."

"Oh okay, I see now. Then I'll endure it... Ooh~ ...Ah, it feels like I'm slowly getting used to it. Yes, it's really very warm~"

"I only came here by pure chance, but this hot water turns out to be really great—Ah, hey!"

A powerful sense of dissonance suddenly pierced his mind. He had overlooked the matter because things had developed too naturally, but this was absolutely something that must not be ignored. Haruaki suddenly opened his eyes, trying to confirm the appearance of the other customer immersed in the hot water beside him. But wait, hold on, confirming would be bad as well, right? Hence, just as he was about to shut his eyes again with maximum haste—

"Ahaha~ Haruaki-kun, don't worry. I already transformed to a boy in the changing room."

"...Oh."

Haruaki apprehensively confirmed the other person's appearance. The customer next to him was undoubtedly Sovereignty but his hair was shorter than just now and the bulging chest was gone. As for the lower body... Due to being soaked under the hot water, the actual details were not visible. This should be okay, probably.

"R-Really? I almost forgot you had a male mode because I seldom see you in that form."

The «Sovereignty-Perfection-Doll» would fall in love with its owner and was the doll created for that purpose. Furthermore, since the romantic partner could be either male or female, Sovereignty—required to fulfill its duties perfectly regardless of the owner's gender—possessed the function to control physical characteristics of both male and female bodies.

"Hmm~ I'm actually a boy quite frequently when I'm home. After all, with Shiraho—"

"No, hold on, I don't think it's appropriate for me to listen anymore! Please end this topic!"

Really? Sovereignty tilted her head in puzzlement. Only when that name was mentioned did Haruaki realize suddenly in alarm the kind of unknown consequences he was going to face if Shiraho—Sovereignty's lover—found out about the current situation. Haruaki shivered in fright after imagining: "From what I hear, you were bathing together with Sovereignty? You have apparently grown weary of living, human!" He had a feeling that things could develop into something this serious. Even though Sovereignty had transformed into a boy, Haruaki did not think Shiraho would let him off... But now that they were already immersed in the bath together, there was nothing he could do.

In any case, Sovereignty was definitely a boy right now. But... Since she was usually female for the most part, combined with the fact that her voice was virtually the same, possibly due to preconceived impressions, Haruaki felt completely uncomfortable. Trying not to look at Sovereignty as much as possible, he said:

"Putting that aside—Uh, why did you suddenly come running to this side? Oh, I'm not saying it's bad for you to be here, but I was expecting you to play and bath with Fear and the other girls."

"That's what I wanted to do in the beginning, but as you can see, if I went over to that side, Haruaki-kun, you'd be bathing all on your own, right? I was thinking that'd be lonely for you~ ... Umm... Maybe... Am I being a bother... to you?"

Sovereignty looked up slightly, glancing at Haruaki. His facial features were essentially identical to that of his female form, hence, Haruaki felt his own heart skip a beat suddenly.

"O-Of course not, I just said, right? There's definitely nothing bad. I should thank you instead... I guess, yes. Really, having a dip in such a big bath alone, it does feels quite a shame and lonely."

"I see, thank goodness. Then I can say that I've once again achieved today's lucky action of 'treating others with kindness.' Ehehe."

Her demure, smiling face was causing Haruaki's heart rate to instantly accelerate again. No, calm down. Sovereignty is male right now. There's no reason to blush or get nervous at all. I have to calm down!

It must be due to looking at Sovereignty. If I look away, there should be no problem. Haruaki focused his consciousness on the hot water while closing his eyes with the mindset of an ascetic monk in training. Hence, all that remained was Sovereignty's unhurried voice entering his ears.

"Hooh~ Soaking in such a huge bath, it feels like being tightly embraced in someone's bosom."

"Oh... Sure..."

Haruaki's mind could not work properly. Stop, stop talking with such a girly voice.

"I'm also starting to get used to this temperature. This tingling feeling on my body, it's making me feel comfortable starting from the depths of my core..."

"Y-Yeah."

"Ahhh, I'm about to melt... This is getting too mcuh. Ah mmm... So nice..."

Crap. After closing his eyes, Haruaki was finding his imagination running away in weird directions. So I guess keeping my eyes slightly open might be better after all? Haruaki tried to raise his eyelids slightly...

—Wobbling.

"!"

He frantically closed his eyes again. For an instant, he saw something strange. No, an illusion. Surely the circuits in his brain had become abnormal due to hearing weird noises. That must be it. So I'll open my eyes again, this time, definitely—

"Mmm~ Public baths are truly the best~"

Sovereignty stretched comfortably. The hot water splashed slightly in front of her chest, producing waves of ripples.

"Not an illusion—! Hold on, it's popped out! Something has popped out!"

"Hmm? What's the matter?"

"I repeat—Y-Your chest has popped up!"

Haruaki frantically turned his back to her. The view was unclear due to the steam but there was no mistake. Two bulging masses were definitely floating above the hot water just now. Water droplets were sliding along the smooth curves. Why?

"Eh? ...Oh, you're right~ Ehehe, sorry. Because it felt too pleasurable, I guess it popped out on its own when I relax—"

"No, you don't need to explain, just deal with it quickly!"

"Uh... Down below... Oh, it's still a boy's, so there's no problem. Then it's just up here, yeah, yeah..."

Sovereignty was performing some kind of action, making waves in the bath water. Haruaki recalled her mentioning before that physical stimulation was needed to make the breasts shrink. So most likely, she was massaging—No, not allowed to imagine.



"I-I'm all warmed up already, so I'll go rinse myself first. Enjoy your dip as long you'd like."

Confronted with the prospects of hyperemia in various ways, Haruaki fled the bath.

Part 5

She had never been to this kind of place.

Truly a venue of the "unknown."

In that case, it was necessary to turn the unknown into the already-known.

Un Izoey's hazy gaze swept across the area of the female bath. The place was filled with numerous trivial unknowns. Naturally, she knew how to use the showering facilities but somehow she felt that the shapes were not the same as what she had used previously. Using this equipment in the same manner should be okay, right? Whose soap was that on the floor? Did someone forgot to take theirs back? If not, did she need to pay to use it?

"Hey Cow Tits... Look, I can't believe she's looking around this much."

"How troubling. It looks like that child must be taught many things... No helping it. In any case, you should sit down here first. Before you enter the bath, wash off those stains on your body."

Muramasa sighed while placing a stool in front of a showering station. Next, she prepared another stool on the side and sat down on it. Then she waved to Un Izoey. Un Izoey obeyed. Under the shower, the mirror reflected her body's image. For a warrior of her tribe, her body was a little too slender.

"So, this is the shampoo and this is the body wash. Use it separately to wash your hair and your body."

"My question: they can be used freely?"

"Yes. This isn't provided for free, rather, it's already included in the entrance fee."

So that was how it was, another unknown resolved. Looking at the mirror, Un Izoey discovered that her face really was filthy from oily stains. Hence she first used the soapy water on her body to wash away the stains... Done. Then she washed her body. After using both hands to wash the

breasts that had been gradually growing heavier lately, she noticed Fear-in-Cube, sitting on her left, staring at her intently.

"...What's wrong?"

"Don't mind me. This is my first time witnessing Cow Tits and you, in other words, the enemy camp, washing those weapons. At least allow me to scout out the enemy... I see now, the hand needs to reach down below, and even the inner side needs to be washed huh... Muu~ Hmph, what a pain! I knew it, those useless things only get in the way, so I suggest scrapping those weapons as quickly as possible! Disarm! Disarm!"

"Weapons... Disarm...?"

"Like I said, just ignore her."

"No, Cow Tits, you're the one who should pay more attention. What's with that move of yours!? I can't believe you're using one hand to lift it up while washing the inner side with the other hand... It's totally unbelievable! This maintenance is a complete pain in the ass! No matter how I look, I must say that weapons of my size are much more superior!"

"Putting aside whether yours are superior or not, I do agree that washing them is troublesome indeed. And they're heavy too."

"Muu! This confidence is so infuriating...!"

Un Izoey could not tell if these two girls' relationship was good or bad. Speaking of which, she could not understand what they were talking about at all. There were still so many unknowns in this world.

During this time, Un Izoey also finished rinsing her body and proceeded to wash her hair. Then in order to wash away the lather, she was about to push the switch at the shower, but—

"...?"

"Hmm, my water stopped. What happened, the shower broke?"

Un Izoey was not the only one puzzled. Likewise, the girl with suds all over her silver hair was also tilting her head as well.

"The showers in the bath house are designed to stop supplying water after a certain time. This is to prevent people from wasting water."

"Muu, that's quite troublesome then. So I have to press again every time?"

Fear-in-Cube pouted then looked towards Un Izoey.

"Can't be helped. Let's do this by division of labor. Hey, you'll be in charge of pressing the switch while I'll help you rinse off the suds... Then in exchange, you'll help me rinse off the suds from my hair!"

"Affirmative."

Un Izoey kept pressing the shower switch repeatedly. Holding the showerhead's tube, the silver-haired girl circled over to her back and started to run one hand through Un Izoey's hair. The water temperature was just right. Her small, nimble hand was also manipulating Un Izoey's hair with just the right force. To be honest—It was very comfortable.

Next, they switched positions and it was Un Izoey's turn to rinse Fear-in-Cube's hair. How troubling. She had never washed another person's hair or body before and did not know how to fine-tune her force.

"Nyoh! That's doing it a bit too hard, you don't need to rub it so forcefully to wash it. Uh, that's too soft now."

"I'm really sorry because I'm not used to it. I apologize with this kind of apology."

While agonizing over how to fine-tune her strength, Un Izoey finished washing Fear's hair. Since this was the first time, perhaps there was no helping it, but Un Izoey hoped to do a better job next time, regardless whether there was going to be a next time or not.

"Phew~ You two are washed nice and clean now. So, next is a dip in the bath. The important thing to remember is not to let your towel dip into the bath, also—"

"The moment has finally arrived! Great! Since we're lucky enough to have such a wide space with no others, I'll show you two my magnificent swimming—"

"Of course, swimming is not allowed. Only little children who are inexperienced and have no common sense would do that."

"...Like I was going to do that. I'm gonna show you my magnificent form as a mature lady entering the bath. Feel free to be amazed by the artistry of my form, soaked in the bath!"

Dipped into the bath, Un Izoey found the water hot enough to make her body tingle all over. However, it was not unbearable. As her body gradually grew accustomed to the feeling, she could feel the sense of warmth seep into her muscles.

"Phew..."

She could not help but exhale. So this was a bath house, a comfortable place that made people relax this much. Wonderful. Best of all, poisonous gases did not emerge from this place.

However, perhaps this feeling only resulted because she was not yet used to the experience. Did the two other girls feel just as comfortable? Hence, Un Izoey looked towards them—

"... "..."

Strangely enough, both of them were making somber faces. What happened? Were they unable to withstand the heat? No—both of them were gazing towards the same direction. Apparently, it was the sound coming from there that caused their expressions to darken. Un Izoey perked her ears to listen in as well.

"Ah! ...Haruaki-kun, you're so amazing... This feels great... Wow..."

From the other side of the wall, a certain person's androgynous voice could be heard faintly.

Part 6

"S-Stop making weird noises, okay?"

"I can't help it, because it feels so nice..."

How did things come to this? Haruaki was currently facing Sovereignty's back.

Just now, he had fled the bath and was about to rinse himself. But Sovereignty ended up chasing after him. Insisting on thanking Haruaki for his regular care and attention, Sovereignty had scrubbed his back, refusing to take no for an answer. In that case, Haruaki had no choice but to scrub Sovereignty's back in return. It would be too rude to receive a back-scrubbing without returning the favor.

Driving Sovereignty's strange cries out from his mind, Haruaki moved his hands in total concentration. Applying body wash onto the smooth skin, he gently rubbed and spread it. The snow-white and delicate back, the slender shoulders, the back of the neck where hair was clinging, all of it seemed inexplicably seductive. Having clearly turned into a boy already, why did Sovereignty still possess such a beautiful back?

"Haruaki-kun, I don't mind if you go harder. Also, could you wash a little further down, okay~?"

"E-Even if you ask me to wash lower—"

Haruaki shifted his gaze slightly lower down Sovereignty's back. Ah, those soft buttocks, compressed slightly against the stool from the weight of sitting down, no, he's a boy, so there's no need to be concerned—

Just at this moment—

"Hey—! Damn you, shameless brat, what are you doing!? I'll curse you!"

"Woah!"

The sudden roaring caused Haruaki to shudder. Sitting on his stool, he looked back to see Fear at the top of the wall separating the male and female baths, showing a vicious look on her face. She had probably jumped up and grabbed the wall's edge. Next, Konoha also peered out awkwardly from beside her—

But as soon as she witnessed the situation on the male side of the bath, she instantly smiled. It was the terrifying kind of smile that brought chills down one's spine.

"Looks like... You truly wish for me to mete out punishment of the highest level, Haruaki-kun."

"Hold on, you're all mistaken! This is really a misunderstanding!"

"Oh, it's you two, Fear-chan and Konoha-chan~? Sorry, I ran over to this side~"

"What do you mean, ran over to this side!? Sovereignty, what are you thinking!?"

"Wah! Fear-san, watch out...!"

Fear went as far as to lift her upper body and lean forward. Frantically, Konoha extended her arm horizontally to cover up Fear's chest to block Haruaki's view. Konoha breathed a sigh in relief. Meanwhile—

"Don't worry, I'm currently a boy! See!"

"Yo—!"

This time, it was Sovereignty's turn to stand up suddenly, turning towards the separating wall all at once. Haruaki also extended his arm horizontally in reflex, blocking Sovereignty's lower body from Fear and Konoha's view. Phew—Haruaki breathed a sigh of relief as well. For someone whose body could turn male or female at will, Sovereignty probably did not mind even if Fear and Konoha saw. But in terms of public decency, it would be quite bad in all sorts of ways after all.

Seeing Sovereignty standing legs astride in a dangerous posture, Fear blushed a little. However—

"I-It's true that your boobs are god... But even if you've turned into a boy, there are things that I still can't accept! Anyway, no means no! You must come back to this side!"

"Indeed! To think you're having bath together with Haruaki-kun, just the two of you, that's too enviable... No, what on earth are you two doing!? I even heard weird cries!"

"Aha, we were just scrubbing each other's back very normally~ After all, it's a new year and I'd like to thank Haruaki-kun again for his everyday care and hope to continue getting along... Also, seeing as we're at a bath house for once, I was thinking that scrubbing his back would be the best method to express gratitude."

"Th-This does sound fair enough..."

Speaking of which, Sovereignty did seem to have said something similar back when scrubbing Haruaki's back. But compared to the words, the soft touch of Sovereignty's hands had left a deeper impression on Haruaki's memory.

Just at this moment, Haruaki heard a sudden noise from behind. It also sounded extremely close by.

"—My understanding: discovery of a means to convey 'let's get along together from now on.' Since this is the best method, regarding the

experience of scrubbing each other's back, I conclude with the conclusion that I should try it out."

"Eh?"

Something touched Haruaki's back with a thud. Un Izoey. Un Izoey's... Must be a foot, right? With extremely skillful and precisely controlled force, she was using her foot to scrub Haruaki's back. Why was she here? Did she jump over the wall?

"Even if I don't know how to adjust my hand's force, there should be no problem with my foot. I am thinking this kind of thought. This is like a massage."

"H-Hey?"

"My demand: Please do not look back. After all, I am naked... Too embarrassing."

In a rare moment, Un Izoey sounded quite embarrassed, just as she had claimed. This girl, who always exposed her navel and her feet, actually had a sense of shame? —However, there was no time to be pondering such questions.

Without needing her to point out, Haruaki knew he must not look back. Absolutely forbidden to look back. Surely, she was standing behind him and since she was currently using her foot to scrub his back, it implied that she had one leg lifted up, in other words—One look behind and Haruaki would undoubtedly be confronted with a shocking sight.

"C-Cow Tits!"

"I-Immorality Blocker (Bath House Variant)!"

"My eyes!"

As Konoha swung her arm, the body wash flying from her struck Haruaki squarely in the eyes, depriving him of his sight. Immediately after, there were some thuds. In his hazy, tear-filled field of view, what looked like two flesh-colored objects had jumped down from the separating wall, but naturally, Haruaki did not see clearly.

"That's dangerous! Don't kick back reflexively. This is for your own good, stay still!"

"...Sorry, it was because I felt a strong aura of murderous intent—Then why are you carrying me on your shoulder like a luggage?"

"Wawa, what's going on, what's going on?"

"Sovereignty secured! Time for a retreat—!"

Then Haruaki heard the sound of forceful kicks against the tiles, followed by a splash into a bath tub.

"That really stings. What the heck happened...?"

By the time Haruaki rinsed the body wash from his eyes and recovered his vision, the male bath was already devoid of any other people. From the female bath's direction, the voices of Fear and Konoha scolding Sovereignty and Un Izoey harshly could be heard.

Haruaki did not feel any sense of salvation at all, because after the bath, he was probably going to be facing a lecture a hundred times harsher than what he was hearing now (likely accompanied with physical punishment).

Soon after, Sovereignty climbed over the separating wall and returned to the male bath. He was still in his male body, but at Konoha or someone else's insistence, his body was wrapped in a bath towel. Rather than wrapped at the waist, the towel even covered his flat chest. In fact, Konoha and Fear did not want him to return, but there was no choice given that Sovereignty's clothes were on the male side after all, thus wrapping him up was the reluctant but only solution they came up with. After all, given the chest popping incident just now, doing things this way was actually only natural.

"Ooh~ They scolded me so harshly..."

"I'd really like to sympathize with you, but as soon as I imagine what's going to happen to me, I have no strength left for that. Anyway, I'm going for another rinse. Let me calm myself down first before going out..."

Part 7

After harshly reprimanding Sovereignty, Fear and Konoha allowed him to return to the male bath. After all, it could not be helped that Sovereignty's clothes were in the male changing room. Since it would be bad if the boys exited the bath first and escaped, Fear and Konoha decided to leave the female bath as quickly as possible.

"Phew~ The bath was so comfortable, but the other stuff has totally exhausted me."

"Indeed. It was truly too immoral..."

"My apologies. I am very sorry. Because the top of the wall is open, I thought moving across was allowed."

"There's no way ordinary people can jump across to the other side in one leap, okay!"

While talking, they pulled the glass door open and entered the changing room. In that instant, the rear view of a long-haired person could be seen exiting the changing room to enter the lobby. Did that person leave because they were too loud? I'm so sorry about that... Fear thought to herself while wiping herself dry. Then walking over to the basket where her clothes were kept, she was just about to get dressed when—

She noticed Un Izoey freezing unnaturally in the middle of searching the basket beside her, staring into the basket with a shocked expression.

"What's wrong?"

"...Nubowa is missing...!"

Fear cocked her head. This country girl still seemed unused to speaking Japanese and was always using weird tribal language.

"What does nubowa mean? No matter what it is, since you placed it in the basket, it can't possibly have gone missing. You should search again more carefully—Hmm?"

Fear cocked her head again in puzzlement. She stood on her toes and looked at her own basket while rummaging through the clothes nonstop, confirming the absence of what she was trying to find. No, it really was gone. What ought to be worn on her body was missing. Konoha was apparently confronted with the same situation.

"...! Hold on, how could... How could it be missing!? I clearly put it in—"

"Cow Tits, you too!?"

"Nubowa... Where did it go...?"

"Judging from those looks, the same goes for both of you...?"

"Yeah, this is serious now, very serious."

Fear and Konoha looked at each other and suddenly narrowed their eyes. This was a huge problem. Although exceedingly simple, it was absolutely a huge problem that could not be ignored. Indeed, simply stated—

"—The panties are missing."

Part 8

Sighing, Haruaki and Sovereignty exited the male bath. As soon as the upcoming lecture came to mind, Haruaki felt inexorably depressed.

Haruaki dried himself with a towel in the changing room and put on his clothes again. Reaching towards his own basket, Sovereignty cried out "...Ah" lightly as though recalling something and looked up. Had Sovereignty forgotten to bring something?

What's wrong? —Just as Haruaki was about to ask, the toilet door in the changing room happened to open and a man walked out. A short, young man, roughly twenty-years-old, dressed in a a shirt and slim-fit pants. He must have come in while Haruaki and Sovereignty were in the bath.

Haruaki nodded lightly as a greeting, prompting the man to nod in return.

"Umm.. Excuse me, for this bath house, all I need to do is put money into the fee box, right? Because it's my first time here... The old lady attendant didn't respond no matter what I said to her. I'm very confused."

"Oh~ It's our first time here too, so I'm not too sure either... But putting money in should be okay, right? Or rather, I couldn't find any other way to pay."

"Really? Then it can't be helped. If I made a mistake, I'll just have to apologize next time I visit."

While the young man was scratching his head, someone forcefully pulled open the sturdy door separating the male changing room and the lobby.

"Emergency situation! Everyone gather out front—!"

"Uwah! Hey Fear, this is the male side, you know!? Don't open it!"

"Now isn't the time for saying things like that. Anyway, I am ordering everyone in the bath house to assemble in the lobby immediately!"

"Everyone... Including me? I was just about to go in the bath."

"Muu... A man? No, you have to assemble first as well!"

"Come on! Stop causing trouble for other customers. I'm sorry, please don't mind her. Go ahead and enter—"

"Damn you, shameless brat, this is an extremely emergency situation! There's an incident that must be resolved as quickly as possible!"

"Incident?"

"Yes!" Fear nodded, arms crossed, vigorously puffing her chest out—but then she immediately held down her skirt as though remembering something. Then with an embarrassed and furious expression, she glared at Haruaki and said:

"In short... There's an underwear thief. Me, Cow Tits and country girl, our underwear has all been stolen!"

Commanded by Fear and the girls, all the other customers in the bath house were gathered in the lobby, a total of six. They were respectively the man Haruaki had met just now in the changing room, an aggressive-looking man and a fancy middle-aged woman who seemed to be acquainted with him, a scowling high school girl who was playing with her cellphone, as well as two women who appeared to be university students, putting on cosmetics using makeup mirrors. The two women were grumbling "seriously, what the heck." "Yeah, I'm going to be late for my part-time job." There were definitely a couple customers sitting on the massage chairs and the resting seating back when Haruaki's group first entered the bath house, but recalling who was who among these people was beyond their memory. The old lady tending to the bath house simply wriggled the corners of her lips, apparently unable to provide any useful testimony, hence they decided to just let her continue to sit in her chair. Ignoring her existence was probably not going to affect the investigation very much.

Having exited the bath house, Konoha returned with a solemn expression.

"I've asked the oden stall owner who has been opposite the bath house all this time. He said that no one has exited after we entered."

"I see. In other words, the culprit is among these people as expected!"

Fear nodded vigorously. For some reason, Sovereignty was looking very awkward and uncomfortable. Un Izoey said:

"To dare steal nubowa, truly unforgivable. My declaration: the culprit will pay the price accordingly...!"

Having entered combat state, her eyes swept a sharp glare over everyone present. Too scary. Haruaki worried if she would suddenly use her foot to draw out a knife from under her skirt. Speaking of which, her skirt's wide open slit also felt even more precarious than usual.

"H-Hey, I already understand the situation now. Calm down."

"My reply: giving objection that I cannot calm down. Nubowa has been stolen by unknown person. But that is a very sacred item...!"

"R-Really?"

Haruaki had never heard of sacred underwear. But Un Izoey was someone who kept her navel exposed at all times for a reason like the earth's energies, so this sort of thing could not be ruled out for certain.

Haruaki concurred with a stiff face and Un Izoey nodded seriously.

"My answer: precisely. In my tribe, it is sometimes passed down from parents to children. This might be an unknown that is difficult to understand for you, but it is believed that worshiping it every night will bring good luck. In the face of hazards such as fire, hurricanes or the attacks of other tribes, the nubowa must be taken away first."

"Worshiped every night...! What can I say? I-It's really surprising..."

"Hence, I absolutely cannot forgive someone who dares steal nubowa. This is a great crime where punishment by skinning, roasting, and being thrown into a nest of poisonous snakes is deserved. My determination: once the culprit is caught, I must make him suffer the consequences. This is already certain...!"

"P-Please show some mercy..."

Haruaki really hoped she was joking, but judging from her deathly cold gaze and atmosphere, it really did not seem like a joke. Now that was truly troubling. If necessary, he might have to ask Fear and Konoha to restrain her—But judging from the equally terrifying gaze they were using to sweep over the suspects, in all likelihood, they were going to help out instead.

Sovereignty still seemed taken aback in fear of Un Izoey's intimidating aura, hunching her shoulders and crying out softly: "Ah... Awawa...!" She could not be counted on as reinforcements at all. In other words, ultimately, Haruaki probably had no choice but to risk his own safety to protect the culprit's life. Please, let's not come down to this.

While Haruaki was pondering this and that, Fear was also explaining the situation to the other customers. Then she glared viciously at the suspects again.

"I'll say this again... Since no one has left the premises, the culprit is someone here! Confess now before it's too late! But even if I say that, the lowly pervert probably isn't gonna admit the crime so readily. Did anyone see someone acting suspicious? Like seeing someone sneaking into the female bath, that kind of thing."

The two university girls first looked at each other then spoke without any interruption in applying their makeup:

"Sigh~ Such a pain. Like anyone would care about that."

"So true so true~ It's not like we'd keep staring at the female bath~"

Next, the seemingly obedient and honest high school girl also spoke up: "I've been busy texting. Right now, I'm at the critical stage when I'm deciding whether or not to break up with my boyfriend." The young man Haruaki had met in the male changing room shook his head and said: "I'm very sorry but I don't know anything either." The scary-looking man and the middle-aged lady suggested with annoyance: "Hurry and call the police so that we can all leave!"

"What's the point of calling the police!? If the culprit escapes while we're relaxed and calling the police, then takes the opportunity to do something to the loot... Ahhh, that's totally gross!"

"Agreed. We must personally punish this audacious pervert...!"

Fear and Konoha exchanged nods in agreement, confirming each other's level of seriousness. Then—

"Anyway, since no one saw anybody suspicious, we'll just have to check everyone one by one. Mainly the females."

"Hmm? Why the females? Normally, you'd suspect a man, right..."

"Right when we got out from the bath, we happened to spot a clearly suspicious figure fleeing the changing room frantically. We had yet to discover the crime at that point, so all we registered was a head of long hair... No matter what, visiting the changing room without entering the bath is way too unnatural. Consequently, that person is the prime suspect."

"I've seen it on television before. Bad men would use women accomplices to steal underwear or take voyeuristic shots of the female bath, so this could be a similar case."

Hearing Konoha and Fear's explanations, Haruaki secretly glanced at the customers present. All of the females had long hair and matched the description completely.

"So, first allow us to check your personal belongings. Our pan—A-Ahem, would definitely serve as the strongest evidence. Once we find them, no amount of denial will hold up."

"Such a pain~" "Don't you know what's called privacy rights?" The university girls pouted and grumbled in displeasure, but two other people reacted even more intensely than them. The intimidating man and the middle-aged woman.

"Do whatever you like, but I'm very busy! Hey, I'm leaving!"

"Yeah, like anyone's going to listen to you. I can't believe you're suspecting us. That's why I hate youngsters nowadays!"

The two of them turned around at once and walked towards the bath house's exit. However, in that instant, Haruaki saw a certain dark-skinned body move.

With instantaneous explosive power beyond normal humans, the brown silhouette jumped, skirt fluttering, easily flying over Haruaki's head (the instant he realized this, Haruaki frantically ducked), landing right in front of the departing fierce-looking man. Then the girl swiftly used her foot to draw out a knife from under her skirt in one flowing motion, spreading the skirt slit and raising a dark-skinned leg up high—Held between her toes, the knife was pressed firmly against the scary man's neck. The man froze like a statue. The other customers watched in stunned astonishment.

Maintaining her posture, Un Izoey brought her eyes, filled with cold, murderous intent, close to the man.

"My question: confirming if you are the culprit who stole nubowa? The first suspect to escape is too suspicious."

"Eeeeeee..."

The scary man and the middle-aged woman went limp and sat down on the floor. Un Izoey's eyes seemed to be saying: "So, how should I dissect the prey next?" while gazing down at them. Her long leg was still raised high with the knife. The skirt on her thigh began to slide down due to gravity, further widening the slit—



"Hold on, your leg! Your leg—!"

Konoha swiftly moved in front of her to grab the hem of her skirt, then frantically covered up her thigh and something beneath.

"Think carefully before you act. You're lifting your leg too high!"

"...? I don't quite get what you mean, but I definitely thought before I acted. If they are guilty, they must pay the price...! Specifically, it starts with the blood letting."

"Awawawa~" Witnessing this scene, Sovereignty became even more afraid. There's no need to be that scared, right? Haruaki thought. However, this was apparently Sovereignty's first time seeing Un Izoey's battle mode, so there was no helping it.

"...C-Cough, uh, how should I say this...? Just as you all can see, that country girl is from a foreign land and peaceful Japan's common senses doesn't work on her. Of course, as long as we intervene, she can be stopped because we know her. But this girl is very unstable right now, so unfortunate accidents might happen under the current circumstances... Yeah. So my advice is don't make any reckless moves."

Fear spoke solemnly, probably seizing this rare opportunity to make use of Un Izoey's serious intimidation. That being said, it was totally a threat.

"..."

All the customers present were frozen. They were almost like unfortunate commoners who were taken hostage in a bank robbery.

Once everything is over, I hope no one calls the police to arrest us—Haruaki thought to himself while sighing deeply.

Part 9

The customers proceeded to offer their full cooperation, just like bank employees commanded by bank robbers to open up the vault.

Fear's group checked everyone's personal belongings in succession. First they checked the females. The high school girl, the two university girls and the middle-aged woman. But no evidence could be uncovered in their belongings. "Hmm~" Fear inclined her head and looked at the remaining customers.

"Uh, me too?"

"Yeah, because accomplices are possible... Like a man ordering a woman to go steal panties. It's possible that the loot has been handed over already, so let us check."

"I don't mind... Please go ahead."

After asking the young man to open his bag, Haruaki and Fear peered into it at the same time. A single glance was enough to clear him of suspicion. The bag only contained a portable music player and a paperback book. Nothing else.

"What, you're only carrying this bit of stuff? Your pockets would have been enough... Where are your change of clothes?"

"I used to keep my music player in my pocket but ended up losing it. Since I'm also scared of dropping and breaking it, I've been keeping it in my bag recently. As for a change of clothes... I only decided on a whim to come in for a bath when passing by, that's why I didn't bring any."

"Then that's similar to us. Okay, next, that mister over there!"

The man with the scary face kept glancing at Un Izoey frequently while opening his Boston bag. Mixed in his change of clothes was cryptic information related to realtors and an envelope of cash.

"So shady, what is it for?"

"Work-related funds. There's nothing shady about it."

"My doubt: I ask if you are telling truth? If you dare lie..."

"—It's the truth!"

Un Izoey leaned forward and questioned, causing the man to straighten his back for some reason, answering respectfully. Apparently, the intimidating effects from the threat of bloodletting earlier still lingered.

"Hmm... So troubling, we failed to find anything! Where did the stuff go!?"

"Maybe the thief hid them. Let's try searching places like under the vending machine."

"Or—the thief might have hid them in a pocket, or even wearing it. Okay, Cow Tits, you'll be in charge of searching the lobby. Country girl and I will do body searches."

"Understood. So, Sovereignty-san, could you help out? Let's split up to search... Sovereignty-san?"

"Hueh? Oh... Uh... We need to search this place? Okay okay~ You can count on me~! Yes~ I will try my best in searching~ Something like that!"

Looking a bit distracted and worried, Sovereignty responded to Konoha with inexplicable excitement and began to look for the underwear. Since Haruaki could not help in the body searches, he joined the lobby search team.

As much as Fear and the girls frowned at the disgusting image of "the male accomplice putting on a pair of stolen panties," they still went as far as to pull open the top of their pants or to reach their hands to search the pockets of the young man and the scary-faced man. The young man simply smiled in embarrassment while the scary-faced man remained frozen towards Un Izoey's checking, like a frog under a snake's sights. Although it was none of his business, Haruaki could not help but worry, hoping that the middle-aged woman, unknown whether she was the man's wife or mistress, would not start despising the man as a result of this.

Next came the body searches for the ladies. Probably deciding that it would be inappropriate to conduct out in public view, Fear and Konoha took them to the female changing room while Haruaki, Sovereignty and Un Izoey basically finished checking the lobby. Fear and Konoha returned with sulking faces.

"How is it? We couldn't find anything."

"Nothing on our side either. We also took the opportunity to make a search of the female changing room but still found nothing... Where the heck did the stuff go? It's not like someone could have eaten it."

"Please don't say something so terrifying. But then again, I'd be really impressed if the culprit would go so far in such totally perverse behavior just to eliminate evidence..."

"Anyway, it's really nowhere to be found. Where on earth did it go?"

Although the culprit's identity remained elusive, Fear and the other girls' panties were undoubtedly missing. Since the culprit had not left, those objects must exist physically somewhere and could not have vanished like a puff of smoke. For an instant, Haruaki considered the possibility of the culprit throwing the loot outside, but there were no windows in the lobby and even the female changing room. Hence, the panties definitely still remained somewhere in the bath house.

"Muuumuumuu... No, it's too soon for this to turn into an unsolved case. There are still places to check. Like the male changing room, for example."

"Would the thief deliberately hide stuff in the male changing room...? But there's nowhere else to search, so we might as well try it."

Haruaki decided to head to the male changing room with Fear. Konoha stayed in the lobby, saying: "I'll check this area once more in case something was missed." Both Sovereignty, who was helping out clumsily, and Un Izoey, who was preventing the suspects from escaping, stayed in the lobby as well.

Haruaki entered the changing room and briefly glanced all over. Naturally, nothing seemed unusual at first glance.

"The layout is similar to the girl's side... Okay, let's do a carpet search. Haruaki, you must search seriously."

"Got it."

While casually checking the wicker baskets, Haruaki saw in the corner of his eye that Fear was examining the gaps in between the shelves. Nothing. Nothing in this basket either. Naturally, there was nothing. If hiding something, one would probably choose a hiding spot that was harder to discover, such as—Just as Haruaki was thinking this...

"Hmm?"

Weird. His hand touched something soft. Drawing it out from the basket to have a look—

(It's appeared—! W-Why?)

Due to the little effort it took, Haruaki's mind was sent into turmoil instead. Looking at his hand, there was a small piece of white fabric. Just one. It felt extremely high-class to touch, thin and soft in texture, decorated with lace and quite mature in style. Not only that, it was very narrow and small in

area. Rather than maturity, one could say that it actually exuded an air of sexy purity, who on earth would wear this type of underwear... No wait, now was not the time to be examining a pair of panties intently! Just at the instant when Haruaki was about to gather his chaotic thoughts—

"Muu! Oh right, I forgot to remind you about the most important thing!"

Hearing Fear's sudden yell, Haruaki's heart nearly jumped out of his chest. Reflexively, he scrunched up the pair of panties and stuffed it into his pocket together with his fist. Even he had no idea why he did that.

"W-What's the important thing, Fear?"

"Basically, hand any evidence over to me as soon as you discover it! If you dare take this chance to play with it, sniff it, put it over your head or hide it in your pocket—I will gladly hand your decapitated head over to the country girl!"

"H-Hahaha. How could I possibly... do something like that... Right? Hahaha."

"That laughter is clearly unnatural... Too suspicious!"

As Fear stared at him, Haruaki cursed his behavior from several seconds earlier then proceeded to be overcome with regret.

(Urghhh, what am I doing...!? Wrong, I clearly made the wrong choice—!)

Even though he was startled, why had he stuffed it into his pocket? Did he instinctively choose evasive action due to the guilt of holding female clothing in his hand? How he hoped that all men would react identically when encountering the same situation.

In any case, Fear's suspicious gaze had already locked onto him. Trying to find a chance to hide the incriminating evidence again would be quite challenging. No, he should simply hold his head high in righteous confidence and take it out, declaring loudly: "Oh my~ Because you startled me, I couldn't help but put it into my pocket!" Was Fear going to believe him? Don't be stupid.

Haruaki's brain spun at full speed, trying to find a solution to escape his predicament.

"Uh... Actually, I've wanted to go to the toilet for a while now. I'll take this chance to check the toilet area as well, so I'm leaving you in charge of this side."

In any case, Haruaki decided that blocking Fear's line of sight was of paramount priority. Rushing into the toilet with reckless abandon, he exhaled in relief. So, what now? Pretend he found the pair of panties in the washroom? In order not to be suspected, it would be best to hide it somewhere, then pretend to find it by chance and call Fear to come over—Very well, let's do that.

(So, what could be considered a natural hiding spot... Found one.)

The washroom also had a small sink. Below it was a cupboard that Haruaki decided to make use of. Opening the cupboard's door, he moved aside the toilet paper that filled the interior. While making space, he thought: finding panties is very good and all, but it was only one out of many pairs missing. The mystery still remained. Where were the others? And who was the culprit—?

"Weird, there seems to be something inside... Oh, this is...!"

As it turned out, in the depths of the cupboard, behind the small mountain of toilet paper—

Haruaki found the answer to the whole mystery.

Part 10

Fear strode her way back to the lobby and tossed it—the long-haired wig—to the culprit as though saying "Catch!"

Namely, it was the young man whom Haruaki and Sovereignty had met in the changing room.

"We found it in the washroom. Not just this wig but also women's clothing and our underwear."

"The person who entered the male changing room after Fear and the others discovered the theft of their underwear... That's you, right?"

After Haruaki finished, the young man bit his lip and bowed his head. This reaction was equivalent to a confession.

"In other words, you initially disguised yourself as a woman to enter the bath, then changed your appearance after the crime, right..?"

Konoha narrowed her eyes and spoke softly. Fear nodded in response.

"Because we saw him the instant we were leaving the bath, he probably concluded that he won't be able to escape if we started chasing after him. And if he knew about the oden stall owner outside the bath house, he would be wary of the possibility of the stall owner pointing out which way the thief fled, making it even harder to escape, which is why he frantically entered the male changing room, took off his disguise and prepared to run away—That's probably how it went. The other customers were apparently focused on doing their own thing and this place's layout is such that you can move from the female side to the male side without disturbing the curtains by going through the counter. As long as you ignore the old lady who's tending to the shop, bend over and move through the counter, you should be able to enter the male bath easily without anyone seeing you."

"Yes—I understand now. From the start, he was planning to use this escape method in case something happened. Weren't this man's belongings unnaturally few? I believe that's because his bag originally carried male clothing. After changing into male attire in the washroom, he hid the female clothing he was originally wearing, which is why his bag became so empty."

"Guh..."

The young man was cornered with nothing to say. The university girls whispered to themselves: "No way, seriously!?" "Despicable~" The high school girl also kept backing away, making eyes as though looking at something unclean. The scary-looking man and middle-aged woman seemed relieved, now that they were proven innocent. At the same time, they cast a glance of "It's all your fault!" to reprimand the young man.

Probably unable to withstand all this heavy pressure, the young man suddenly screamed:

"I-I don't know! I don't know anything, move out of the way, move out of the way—!"

Then he made a run for the bath house entrance.

He had probably lost his sense of reason after getting caught as the culprit, therefore forgetting an important memory. His choice of action was clearly a great mistake.

Indeed—After what had happened earlier, he should already know that a certain someone was not going to let him escape.

A dark-skinned figure rapidly blocked the young man's path.

"My condemnation: stealing nubowa is such a heavy crime—I declare the declaration that you will learn the lesson with your body!"

"H-Hold on, I beg you, absolutely not the knife—!"

Hearing Haruaki's pitiful plea, Un Izoey's brow twitched once. Then she lowered her leg that was about to rise. Probably thinking this was a good opening, the young man sped up, charging towards Un Izoey. Raising his fist, he intended to knock her down with reckless abandon and escape—However, as a warrior of the Lab Chief's Nation, Un Izoey could not possibly be defeated by this kind of amateur's attack.

With physical prowess beyond ordinary humans, she jumped up, dodging the young man's fist. While in midair, she extended her legs, clamping the young man's head between her thighs. Then arching her back while using the man's head as a pivot, she spun her own body like a pendulum—Making use of the man's running speed, using her legs to clamp his head directly, she threw the young man against the floor. Simply stated, this would be the Frankensteiner technique in professional wrestling, though it was unknown whether Un Izoey would know this name.

Slammed hard against the floor on his back, the young man's entire body went limp. Sitting astride his chest, Un Izoey calmly looked down at him.

But at this moment, she tilted her face slightly, going "...?", probably puzzled by the young man's state. However, Haruaki understood why. Surely Un Izoey was the only one who did not understand.

Konoha shook her head repeatedly, murmuring in exasperation:

"Of course it's great that she didn't draw her knife—Phew. But why did choose a technique as dangerous as the Frankensteiner given these circumstances...?"

Indeed, this move was too dangerous. Using her thighs to grip the enemy to perform a throw. Using leg techniques while wearing a skirt. Right now,

she was straddling him in front of his face. She had yet to retrieve her underwear.

Hence, the young man's current state was only natural.

With an expression as though he had caught sight of heaven, the young man had fainted in utter bliss.

Part 11

Back when they found the things the thief had hidden in the washroom, Fear yelled: "Anyway, the most urgent thing now is to punish the culprit! He must not be allowed to escape! Hurry up!" Then she frantically returned to the lobby, taking the only piece of evidence from the washroom that could be used to interrogate the culprit, namely, the wig. However, now that the culprit's escape was no longer a worry, the stolen articles could finally be retrieved. Although if possible, Haruaki really wished that Un Izoey could have retrieved her underwear before performing the Frankensteiner.

Going along to accompany the girls, Haruaki entered the male changing room. Only the three victims, Fear, Konoha and Un Izoey filed into the washroom. At this moment, Haruaki suddenly felt that he had forgotten something. What was it?

Just as he tilted his head in thought, the girls' voices could be heard from the washroom.

"Ah, it's really here! Thank goodness~ This pair was actually quite expensive..."

"This is mine. Oh my~ Then the remaining—string-like thing must be yours. Here."

"...My understanding: I get it now. So you were looking for these."

"...? Weren't you looking for this too?"

Fear and company talked while exiting the washroom. Immediately, Sovereignty, who was waiting beside Haruaki, suddenly became even more awkward and uncomfortable than before.

Leaving the changing room, Un Izoey looked at Fear with glazed eyes.

"My shame: I confess I completely failed to notice. Because totally preoccupied."

"Wha? What do you mean by that? Then what the heck were you looking for—"

"Very sorry but I report with report that case is not over. I haven't found nubowa yet."

Un Izoey's eyes turned sharp again, as though returning to her beginning state, giving off astounding pressure as she swept her gaze around, speaking softly:

"You all seem to have misunderstood. Nubowa is not underwear. In my tribe, it is like a home's guardian deity, I explain with this kind of explanation. Stones or animal bones that we feel a certain power from are treated as the symbol of the home and safeguarded accordingly. When moving house, a new nubowa must be prepared. After moving to this town, I've been looking and finally found one after great difficulty, just before coming to this place."

"Uh... In other words, apart from underwear, something else was stolen from you as well...?"

"Definitely. Since nubowa is not found yet, the case has not ended—"

Just as Un Izoey spoke with a determined tone of voice—

"I-I am so sorry—!"

Someone suddenly knelt down in prostration with lightning speed.

"Sovereignty!? W-Why did you suddenly kneel down?"

"Sorry, I never knew it was something so important...! I really didn't mean any harm! But after seeing it, I couldn't help myself—"

Sovereignty bowed her head in apology, pressing her forehead against the floor, apologizing with perfect Japanese kneeling form. What? What was going on? Indeed, Sovereignty had been acting strange since a while ago.

Un Izoey swiftly stood before Sovereignty.

"Hya... S-Sorry—! I'll do anything, please don't skin me alive—!"

"Where is nubowa? My demand: please lead the way."

"O-Okay, please follow me..."

Trembling in trepidation, Sovereignty entered the male bathroom through the glass door.

"Eh? It's here!?"

"Yes... Back when I was about to go find Haruaki-kun, I accidentally tripped in the female changing room and knocked a basket over. Then I found that thing... So I took it over to this side directly."

"But where did you put it?"

"Over there... When Haruaki-kun was taking a dip in the bath in the beginning, I lathered it up and immersed it in the water."

Sovereignty was pointing to a wash basin in a corner of the bathroom, containing a mixture of soap and water. Lathered and filled with suds, floating lightly on the surface was—

"Nubowa...!"

A dirty plush doll. It resembled a super deformed puppy, but honestly speaking, it was not that cute. Overall, it seemed a bit distorted with the head not properly secured. Young children would probably cry if they saw it in the middle of the night—It looked like a puppy version of the bizarre, cute bear doll that Ontenzaki Satsuko owned in the past. It could very well come from the same doll series.

"So it's this plush doll...? Sovereignty-san, why did you soak it in water?"

"Uh, it was even dirtier when I first saw it. That's why I wanted to wash it."

Un Izoey bowed slightly, staring at the wash basin with complete focus, looking as though she were hesitating over whether to rescue the plushie or not. Then staying in the same posture, she said softly:

"Because I found it in a garbage dump. My reaction: people in this country really throw away any and everything."

"Ah, so that's why you were filthy all over with slightly torn clothing when we ran into you just now. So you dove into the rubbish heap to save this little guy?"

Un Izoey nodded in reply to Haruaki, then stared at the plushie in the wash basin again. Probably unable to endure her silence—

"Uh... I've repeated this many times but I really didn't know it was this important! Because the horoscope said that my lucky action today is 'treating others with kindness,' and also because it's like my friend, seeing how dirty it was, I couldn't ignore it—Umm, a-anyway, I'm truly sorry—!"

Sovereignty bowed her head and apologized again with contracted shoulders, then looked up apprehensively. However, Un Izoey continued to stare at the plushie only. Hence, Sovereignty turned her face awkwardly and asked again in trepidation:

"Uh... This is for expressing my apology..."

"—!"

Originally in the wash basin, the plushie suddenly jumped out using its limbs that were made of cloth and took a deep bow towards Un Izoey. This was Sovereignty's ability to control dolls using her sovereign authority.

Un Izoey reacted strongly. Reaching out, she grabbed the plushie.

"Hyah! I-I was thinking this would make you happy, but it's no good after all? I'm so sorry for making it move without asking, did I make things worse—?"

"I forgive you."

"...Hueh?"

Un Izoey hugged the plushie tightly against her chest. Her eyes, looking at the bizarre yet cute plushie, how should they be described? —Extremely happy.

"My judgment: I understand you only did it with good intentions for me. Only natural for a doll Wathe like you to worry about other dolls, cleaning it is out of goodwill, in fact, a lot of dirt and stains were cleaned off, in other words, it has become an even better nubowa now..."

Un Izoey nodded in affirmation while muttering as though talking to herself. Then immediately, she glanced at Sovereignty and said:

"...Then it can't move again?"

"Eh? No, provided I'm watching, it can move as long as you like—"

Held in Un Izoey's tight embrace, the plushie raised its arms to shake away water droplets as though doing a hurray gesture. Seeing that, Un Izoey

hugged the plushie firmly. Although her expression looked blank on first glance, there was unconcealable jubilation in her eyes. She was apparently taken in by the plushie's charm. Haruaki never expected her to show a girly side in contrast to the cold warrior image she normally gave off.

"Oh my... Hmm, looks like this incident has drawn to a close. We clearly came here for just a bath, but I never thought it'd turn into this kind of commotion."

"Clearly before coming here, you were grubbing and complaining about wanting something amusing..."

"Cow Tits, you're very annoying!"

"Anyway, she's willing to forgive me, I'm so glad! ...I was worrying what I'd do if I really had to be skinned alive~..."

As tension drained from the mood, Haruaki still could not dispel the weird feeling in his heart. Starting earlier, he kept feeling that there was something important that he seemed to have forgotten—But he could not remember what.

Hmm... What exactly had he forgotten?

Part 12

Casually leaving the thief without moving him, Haruaki's group left the bath house. This was because they did not really want to get involved with the local authorities. Furthermore, someone among the customers on scene was probably going to call the police anyway.

After leaving the bath house, it was still not time to go home. They had to complete their original objective, i.e. shopping. Due to Sovereignty and Un Izoey heading in the same direction for part of the way, they all traveled together for a while.

Un Izoey and Sovereignty were walking side by side in front of the trio of Haruaki, Fear and Konoha. The plush doll was standing on Un Izoey's palm, performing a strange dance under Sovereignty's smiling gaze from the side. In combination with the doll's own bizarre cuteness, those movements were so weird that young children would probably end up traumatized if they saw them in the middle of the night, but Un Izoey

continued to gaze at the plushie with overwhelming joy in her eyes, nodding repeatedly in satisfaction.

"Isn't this scene unbelievable...? I never thought there'd come a time when she'd be walking together with us like this. My past self, back in the cultural festival, surely would have charged to attack her without hesitation."

"Perhaps. I honestly couldn't have foreseen things to have developed to the current state."

Fear whispered and Konoha quietly concurred. Looking at the two girls walking in front, Haruaki said:

"Yeah... But speaking of impossible to foresee, the same goes for you two as well. After Fear arrived, then we met Sovereignty and Shiraho—I wouldn't have expected things to end up like this at all. Nowadays with everyone gathered together, it's become perfectly natural and matter-of-fact, turning into the 'usual scene'... Whenever this crosses my mind, it feels very incredible."

"After some time... Will the current scene turn into a 'usual scene' as well?"

"Who knows. But wouldn't you like that to happen?"

Fear crossed her arms and went "hmph," turning her gaze away.

"I don't know. After all, that girl belongs to an opposing organization and Kirika has many past grievances with her. But she's about to become a student in the same school... As long as she doesn't pick fights for weird reasons, if I think of her as just a country girl who's studying in the same year—Hmm, there's no need to be hostile and nervously staying on guard against her, I guess, probably."

Fear muttered in a roundabout manner. Konoha also sighed and said:

"At least for today, I also feel that there doesn't seem to be a need to be too wary of her... To think she'd be so airheaded that she'd forget about her underwear and even performing leg techniques in that state, also making such a happy look while staring at the plush doll. It'll feel totally stupid to be staying on guard against someone like that—Or rather, starting tomorrow, she will be hanging nearby all the time, so who knows what's going to happen?"

No one knew what changes Un Izoey's arrival in their daily life was going to bring. Neither did they know if any changes were necessary. In the end, Haruaki smiled wryly to reach the following conclusion:

"Anyway... Let's just go with the flow. It's pointless to overthink things, so just do the same as usual."

They already knew that she was not a villain to the core. From now on, she was definitely going to be a student in the same school, spending their school days together. In that case, even if they might enter into conflict due to differences in ideology and standpoint, getting too hung up on this matter all the time would not help.

"Right, Fear, how do you feel about your first time at a bath house?"

"Ohoh, although so much happened, it was very fun! The bathtub was huge and the water was very hot, it feels different from home. I can relax my body and mind so it's really a great place! But the only drawback today was the presence of those eyesores from the enemy faction. Haruaki, did you know? I can't believe those girls have to lift those things up with one hand while using the other hand to wash the inner side. That's just a total pain. Seeing them like that, I finally understand that the saying 'better too big than too small' is totally wrong—"

"H-Hey—! Fear-san, what are you talking about!?"

"I'm just speaking the truth. Anyway, I want to visit next time with Kuroe. Although we went there as a natural development, I feel bad that we didn't include her in our bath house trip."

"Just invite her next time. She'll definitely join in without a moment's hesitation... Speaking of which, we've already used up a lot of time and we still need to get groceries before going home. I hope she won't complain about us being too slow."

Haruaki took out his cellphone from his pocket to check the time. Due to this action, a certain object in his pocket also fell out.

"Hey Haruaki, you dropped something."

"Hmm? Oh, you're right. But did I ever put this kind... of thing... in my pocket...? Ah...!"

Haruaki picked up the object that had fallen onto the street. Without thinking, he spread out the small piece of round fabric. Instantly, he

remembered. He completely recalled the matter he had forgotten until now. Indeed, after discovering this in the male changing room, he originally wanted to hide it in the washroom first. But he ended up discovering the wig and forgot in their haste to apprehend the thief. But wait, why did this happen? If someone was still missing their panties, they would have brought it up, right? As much as Haruaki could not comprehend what was going on, he was in big trouble in any case. This was totally bad!

"Hey, shameless brat... Why do you have something like that in your pocket...?"

"Ha~ru~a~ki~-kun~...?"

With twitching faces, Fear and Konoha approached step by step, intending to encircle him. Probably noticing their strange behavior, Sovereignty and Un Izoey looked back from their position walking ahead. Seeing the object in Haruaki's hand, Sovereignty cocked her head in a puzzled expression.

"Eh? That looks kind of familiar..."

Then she touched her bottom as though remembering something. After confirming a certain fact, she laughed "ehehe" in embarrassment and said:

"Uh... I'm sorry, but that's probably mine! I only noticed now but it looks like I forgot to put it on. Well, it's because I was in a fluster when exiting the bathroom..."

(You simply forgot—!? You should've noticed earlier! Besides, how is it possible to forget!?)

The final mystery was unraveled. This was simply a lost item completely unrelated to the incident, due to Sovereignty's usual airheadedness working its effects. Since Sovereignty was in female form to begin with, transforming into a boy only after entering the male side, leaving a female pair of underwear in the male changing room was not surprising.

"Th-That's great, I get it now. I understand this is Sovereignty's. But even if that's the case, I haven't done anything to be guilty about at all. It just so happened that I forgot to mention that I found this in the male changing room—"

"Oh I see... So you happen to have a habit of putting female underwear in your pocket as soon as you find them? And keeping quiet about it. I see, I see."

"If you pointed it out earlier, I would've realized instantly I wasn't wearing any... Umm... No way... It's just a possibility, but Haruaki-kun, you..."

Sovereignty went red in embarrassment, looking up to glance at Haruaki.

"Umm... You want... my panties...? If that's the case, I still have many other cute panties at home, so... You can have this pair... I don't mind..."

"You've gotten the wrong idea! As I've said already, this only happened because of an unfortunate series of coincidences!"

"No, don't say anything more, Haruaki. I understand. I understand very well."

"Indeed, you don't need to explain any further. There is nothing for you to worry about either."

Fear's hand slammed down on Haruaki's shoulder. Konoha's hand also slammed down on his other shoulder.

Then a strange creaking noise resulted.

"My shoulders are making weird noises I've never heard before! Ouch, it really hurts!"

"In other words, this is what happened. The culprits in the theft incident are not just the male pervert and Sovereignty... But there's a third thief too!"

"Don't worry, I have already thought up what punishment of the highest level ought to be carried out. What a shame, Haruaki-kun, that this will be your final memory for the winter vacation..."

"Wait, Konoha, what kind of memory are you forcing me to make!?"

Haruaki was firmly immobilized by Fear and Konoha. Looking around, he could only see Sovereignty still murmuring in awkward embarrassment: "Will Shiraho get mad? But if it's just one pair of panties..."

In addition, there was Un Izoey, nodding repeatedly with an impressed look on her face while hugging the plushie.

"My comment: everyone looks so happy, how wonderful. I already know this proverb from this country. I decided that now is the right time to say it. In other words—harmony is a virtue."

C u b e × C u r s e d × C u r i o u s



妖刀村正血風録



C u b e × C u r s e d × C u r i o u s

Chapter 2 - Bloody Chronicles of Demon Blade Muramasa

Part 1

Not long after the third school term started, there was one ordinary winter day.

At the Yachi home's entrance, Konoha welcomed the familiar liquor shopkeeper. Ever since a long time ago, the shopkeeper would go door to door to solicit orders, basically soy sauce and sweet rice wine for cooking use, and would ask liquor shops in the neighborhood, which he was on friendly terms with, to deliver straight to customers' homes.

"Here, the usual rice wine your family ordered."

"Yes, thank you very much. The richness in flavor is definitely different when the condiments are prepared by experts~ I can understand why the Yachi family... no, why Haruaki-kun always buys from you since a long time ago."

"What a nice thing to say! But I'm sorry, Konoha-chan, I can't give you a discount even if you flatter me~ Business hasn't been good lately and I'll get scolded by my old mom back home."

"Ahaha, you picked up on it? Here you go, this is the payment."

"Hehe, thank you for your business! By the way, I almost forgot. This is the first delivery of the year, right? I should be saying happy new year!"

"Now that you mention it, that's true. Please continue to take care of us for this year as well."

Carrying the received bottle of rice wine in her arms, Konoha smiled and bowed her head in thanks. At this moment, the liquor shopkeeper seemed to recall something and scratched his head with an "oh crap~" look on his face.

"I see? Since it's the first delivery of the new year... It'd be kind of stingy if I don't give something back to a customer. Now that's something my old mom will really scold me for. But giving a discount now would be a bit odd—Why don't I simply give you something as a little extra? Konoha-chan, please wait for me, I'll go check inside the truck!"

"Eh? Sure..."

Konoha cocked her head while the shopkeeper swiftly ran out of the front door. Konoha remained there obediently. Several minutes later, the shopkeeper ran back, holding what appeared to be a slender package in his hand.

With an inexplicably hesitant look in his eyes, the shopkeeper glanced at what he was carrying and said:

"Ah~ ...Speaking of which, Konoha-chan, Honatsu-san still hasn't returned?"

Why did he suddenly mention Honatsu? Konoha felt puzzled but still answered truthfully.

"There are no signs of him returning for the moment. He didn't contact us at all during New Year's either."

"Really? Hmm~ Although a gift of extra soy sauce would be better, I don't have any left in the truck, so this will do."

"No problem, no problem at all. It's just a freebie so please don't worry about it."

"Hmm~" The liquor shopkeeper tilted his head, troubling over something, but soon he said:

"Yeah, whatever! In principle, consider this a gift for Honatsu-san to drink after he returns! Thinking back, I was already an experienced drinker back in high school... But that's probably because I'm the son of a liquor store owner. Although it's really not too proper, young people should make little mistakes like young people and there's no need to be too harsh on them. Yeah, I guess I'll make this a gift after all. Thanks for your continued patronage this year too!"

The shopkeeper laughed heartily as though saying "Don't sweat the small stuff!" and set down the upright package in front of Konoha.

"But I'll repeat myself, this is a gift for Honatsu-san! In principle! See you next time!"

"...Eh? Oh okay, really... Thank you very much..."

The sudden developments completely baffled Konoha. With a lost expression, she saw the shopkeeper off at the entrance.

Only the mysterious gift remained on scene.

For some reason, the mysterious gift greatly resembled the bottle of cooking wine in Konoha's hands.

Several minutes later, Konoha was staring solemnly at that particular object.

"Hmm~ ...What should I do...?"

Haruaki and Fear had gone out for shopping while Kuroe was still working at the beauty parlor and had not returned. Naturally, there was no one else to discuss.

Hence, Konoha could only keep staring at the object on the living room table, a dilemma in her eyes.

That object was giving off an extremely astounding sense of presence. Konoha was almost awed by it, almost about to be overwhelmed. Had she known in advance, she would not have unwrapped the package—Konoha regretted from the bottom of her heart.

What should she do? How should she handle this type of object?

"This is a huge problem. Indeed, an extremely severe problem..."

Konoha murmured in a fully serious tone, still unable to tear her gaze away. This matter must be handled with caution. Action must be taken after careful thought. Okay, hurry up and think, what should be done first?

"First... First of all..."

At this moment, Konoha suddenly noticed a bottle in the corner of her eye. While she was sitting on the floor with her calves folded against the outside of her thighs, a bottle of cooking wine was lying by her feet. In other words, what the liquor shopkeeper had delivered just now. Indeed, when lost on how to proceed, one should always start with handling the things that were known.

Hence, Konoha used her entire willpower to shift her gaze away from the object on the table. Then holding the bottle of cooking wine, she stood up. She could feel a force pulling at her braids from behind like some kind of

magnetic attraction while she walked to the kitchen and placed the cooking wine into the usual cupboard where condiments were kept. During this time, her mind was still preoccupied with how to handle the object in the living room.

"Of course... No way. Absolutely no way. It goes without saying."

Closing the cupboard, Konoha then moved to the cupboard where utensils were kept, opening the door with a clack and taking out a glass. Indeed, of course. Of course not. She continued to murmur to herself.

"Yes, there's no need to worry at all. Because it's already decided. Yes, there's no need to hesitate at all."

Then taking the glass, she opened the fridge and threw a few ice cubes into the glass with a clatter. The cool sensation transmitted through the glass to her palm, what a comfortable feeling.

"♪~~~~"

This comfortable feeling was compelling her to hum a tune. Rocking her shoulders rhythmically, Konoha returned to the living room with light and lively steps.

Very~ well, the problem was decided. The struggle was over. The difficulty was gone. How nice it felt. But... What exactly was the original problem...?

Konoha tilted her head, placing the ice-filled glass on the table. After sitting down on the tatami, she reached towards the object next to the glass. Swiveling the lid on top, in other words, opening the bottle lid, she then inclined the bottle, pouring the liquid inside into the glass. The ice cubes swirled with a clang. She gulped hard. The drink looked really tasty—

"Ah! Why did I make such thorough preparations—!?"

Konoha suddenly regained her senses. What was she doing? Somehow, it felt as though her body and mind were on different channels... As one would expect, this object possessed a certain kind of magic to it that explained its intimidating sense of presence, right?

Trembling in trepidation, Konoha used her entire body's strength to put down the glass. But at the same time, the ice cubes shook left and right audibly, attacking her willpower, but she desperately resisted.

"Mmmmmmm! W-What a terrifying power...!"

Mustering strength from the core of her being, she reprimanded her willpower. It would be too dangerous if she did not do so. Then Konoha looked at the object once again.

The liquor shopkeeper's gift was a bottle the same size and shape as what was used for cooking wine. However, a single glance was enough to tell that the contents were different. Several small fruits had settled on the bottom of the translucent bottle. Green, seductive fruits.

Plums.

In other words, the true identity of the liquid immersing the plums was undoubtedly—

"I-Is it plum brandy...?"

Konoha gulped again. It had been so long. It really had been so long.

No no no, wait a sec—Konoha frantically shook her head. She was now a high school student, an identity that prohibited the intake of alcoholic beverages. The internal conference in her mind just now should have reached the same conclusion. Absolutely not allowed.

...Stare~

Despite reaching that kind of conclusion, for some reason, she could not tear her gaze away from the plum brandy poured into the glass, away from the plum brandy that she loved the most out of myriad types of alcohol, away from the plum brandy that had finally appeared before her eyes after many years, away from the plum brandy that had brought infinite gratification to her heart when she drank it for the first time, centuries prior.

Konoha quietly licked her lips and said to the air:

"But... But, it's a rare gift from the liquor shopkeeper, plus it's already poured into the glass, throwing it away... would be too much of a waste... Right?"

The bottle was unlabeled, possibly because it was brewed by the shopkeeper himself. Even if he was not the one who brewed it personally, the alcohol used as the base must have taken someone time and energy to brew and prepare. These plums actually bore fruit for the sake of spreading seeds, not for human consumption. Then now that they have been picked, they must not be wasted, probably. This counted as expressing respect towards nature.

Hmm, that would be too much of a waste—Konoha nodded alone to herself, raising her hand in elation, just as she was about to touch the glass—

"No! No no, I have to calm down a bit! Hurry and recall what happened during New Year's! It's not so long ago when the sake of the gods made me act in error and cause trouble for Haruaki-kun..."

The fresh memories turned into an angel's whispers, halting the movement of her hand. Indeed, the situation back then was too scary. Although two other people also got drunk and eventually collapsed, there was no denying that Konoha had caused Haruaki trouble. The same mistake must not be repeated.

However—The alcoholic fragrance was drifting over faintly. The aroma of plums and the beads of condensation on the glass. These were summoning the devil's whispers.

But on the other hand, after repeated considerations, perhaps...

To prevent embarrassments of that sort from happening again, perhaps she ought to help herself gradually grow accustomed to alcohol...?

"..."

Whenever people made decisive errors, they always tended to follow the same model in that very instant.

People trying to lose weight would think "I'll just eat one" and start eating cake. People trying to quit smoking would think "I'll just smoke one cig" and start smoking. People trying to study would think "I'll just read one volume" and start reading manga.

Present before Konoha was the temptation identical to the above objects.

"I-It's already poured out, right? If I simply take care of this glass..."

Indeed, it was just one glass. Afterwards, she was definitely going to place the bottle on the side obediently to wait for his return, then ask for his decision. "The liquor shopkeeper gave us this as a gift. What should we do with it?" Indeed, no helping it. She must offer her respect towards farmers, breweries, nature and the Earth. For their sake, she absolutely must not dispose of this glass of plum brandy, hence—

Konoha grabbed the glass, brought it to her lips and slowly tilted the glass.

"Mmm..."

Gulp. Ever since arriving at this home, she could only recall drinking once. After that one time, for some reason, Haruaki and Honatsu never allowed her to drink the slightest sip of plum brandy again—

The scorching yet ice-cold yet comfortable feeling slid across her throat.

Although she had no idea why those two forbade her from drinking the plum brandy she loved, Konoha decided that right now, she was just going to drink this one glass then put the rest away decisively. Hence, at least taking genuine enjoyment in this one glass should be fine. Hence, Konoha tilted the glass even further—

"Hwah... Lovely..."

This was the decisive instant of Konoha's mistake and also proof of the "I'll just drink one glass" fallacy.

"I'm home~"

"Ohoh, so cold so cold... I must hurry and dive into the kotatsu. It's time for some warmth and rice crackers!"

Haruaki and Fear had returned from shopping. As soon as they opened the door, Fear hastily removed her shoes and entered the house. Then just as she was about to make a mad dash for the kotatsu—

"...Hmm?"

"What's wrong, Fear?"

"No... Somehow it feels different from usual. There's a smell. What's this smell...?"

Haruaki sniffed but could not smell anything strange. Perhaps only Fear with her sharp senses could smell it.

"It's not a burnt kind of stench, right? I really hope there's no fire."

"No, not that kind of smell... Anyway, it should be clear once we have a look. It seems to be drifting out from the living room."

Following Fear's suggestion, Haruaki carried the shopping bags towards the living room. Walking through the corridor, arriving at the sliding door

leading to the living room, Haruaki felt a chill down his spine for some reason. His instincts were apparently trying to convey some message to him.

What happened? As much as he had no idea why he was reacting this way, Haruaki instinctively believed that something shocking must be lying behind this sliding door. He even felt a kind of illusion that something resembling pitch-black miasma was overflowing out of the sliding door's gap in front of him. He experienced an unusual sense of heavy pressure. Was it really okay? Are you really planning to go in there? You won't regret it...? Starting from just now, his survival instincts had been warning him repeatedly.

"...? Why are you standing there spacing out? Hurry and go in."

"No, wait..."

But unlike Haruaki, Fear's defensive instincts had not kicked in. Reaching out from beside him, she simply pulled the living room's sliding door open. Next, they saw—

The image of her back while she was sitting on the veranda, facing the garden.

The instant he saw that back, Haruaki inexplicably felt goosebumps all over his body.

"Eeeeeek...!"

A despairing presence rushed into his brain, pleading that this was a dangerous place. Still ignorant of what had happened, Fear cocked her head in puzzlement and looked at her back.

"Cow Tits? What's she doing?"

Probably hearing Fear's murmuring, she finally looked back.

Face flushed red, the glasses almost having slid off her face, she looked back.

Then drinking directly from the bottle of plum brandy held in her hand, she spoke with a smile of rapture:

"Oh~ ...Haryuaki-kuun~ Welcome home... Where hast thou run off to...? I have been waiting for thee so long... Burp."

Part 2

It's over. A crisis now. Everything has gone south.

Smiling stiffly in an appeasing manner to handle Konoha's dazed and smiling face, Haruaki first checked the state of the living room. A faint smell of alcohol lingered in the air. That must have been what Fear smelled. Next to the table, a glass containing ice cubes was knocked over, forming a puddle on the tatami, but this was the only detail that was different from usual. The disaster zone seemed to be less tragic than imagined.

However—

Haruaki pulled his gaze back to the veranda where the being, who could potentially cause all sorts of disasters, was currently sitting.

That person was both Konoha and definitely not the usual Konoha at the same time.

Flushed red cheeks, glasses half fallen off. Her back was swaying, her head was swaying a little as well. One of her braids was untied but the greatest problem was her clothing.

For some reason, Konoha was only wearing a red kimono, sloppily tied at the waist with a sash. Consequently, it seemed as though dangerous objects were going to fly out immediately even if her body swayed lightly. Even disregarding that, her posture of sitting cross-legged with one knee drawn up was also quite dangerous.

"K-Konoha, why are you dressed like that...?"

"Hmm~? Because it is very hot... Western clothing is nice but I still feel that a kimono facilitates movement—Muho. Haruaki-kun, which do you prefer~?"

"Uh... No, this currently has nothing to do with my preferences, right?"

Konoha stared at him with fully flirtatious eyes. While Haruaki was at a loss for words, Fear seemed to finally understand the current situation and said:

"That's right, it has absolutely nothing to do with the shameless brat's preferences! Damn you, Cow Tits... Stop this nonsense! You must have gotten drunk again, right!?"

Then she strode her way towards Konoha who was sitting on the veranda.

"Hold on, Fear, don't do anything rash...!"

But Haruaki's warning did not make it in time. Probably intending to take the bottle, Fear reached towards Konoha without thinking. As soon as Konoha noticed, sitting where she was, she looked up with her reddened face and instantly—

"What...!?"

Fear's body shook slightly while she growled in surprise at the same time. Haruaki also found it unbelievable. Because Konoha was no longer in front where Fear was reaching towards but had climbed onto Fear's shoulders.

What amazing speed and agility. What exactly did she do to reach that position? Haruaki missed the entire process in between and could not comprehend at all.

Konoha's feet were planted on Fear's left and right shoulders respectively. Half crouching, her knees were bent while her thighs were spread wide. Hunching her back, she examined Fear's face from above. Naturally, one hand was still holding the bottle while her other hand was raised in front of Fear's face. Two of her fingers were bent in a hook-shape, stopping just as they were about to stab into Fear's eyes.

Maintaining her monster-like posture, akin to that of a baboon assaulting a human, she narrowed her hazy eyes, faintly giving off a terrifyingly cold aura, she said:

"Due to... It seems that I have seen thee somewhere before... I shall confirm first. Answer me, little lass... Art thou, little lass... mine enemy...?"

Fear was rendered speechless, but immediately recovering from the shock, she bared her fangs and snarled:

"Y-You bitch...!"

Then she reached with both hands to grab Konoha's fingers in front of her. Using this as the point of contact, Fear launched Konoha in an over-the-shoulder throw. Nevertheless, Konoha simply twisted her body while her kimono fluttered elegantly in the air, finally landing silently on the veranda. Then she took another sip of plum brandy.

"Fuha... Ohoh~ In other words, little lass, as one would expect, thou art mine—"

"N-No, hold on, time out! I'll provide the correct answer. She's not an enemy but a friend! She's really a friend!"

The two girls glared at each other, ready to break out in a fight any moment. In order to convey the fact that he was the messenger of peace, Haruaki raised both arms and rushed between the two girls. Although it felt like stepping into a landmine zone with missiles flying back and forth overhead, Haruaki knew that things would go out of control if he did not intervene.

"Muu." Fear frowned while Konoha relaxed her tense shoulders and smiled, saying:

"Oh my... Haryuaki-kun. This little lass... is no enemy...?"

"Th-That's right, she's no enemy. She's a friend, a friend!"

"...Verily?"

"Honestly, it's the truth!"

Haruaki nodded vigorously and repeatedly while Konoha swayed her head left and right and puffed out her chest. The edge of the kimono's collar happened to get caught on a protruding tip. Only then did Haruaki come to a shocking realization that Konoha was not wearing anything on her upper torso apart from this kimono, sending him into shivers of terror. But putting that aside, Konoha was currently nodding in satisfaction, laughing joyfully:

"Yes, very well! Hahaha!"

Then she took another sip of plum brandy. Haruaki exhaled in relief.

Then Konoha sat down on the spot again, casually taking small sips of plum brandy. Fear stared at her with a frown while quietly approaching Haruaki and whispered:

"Hey, shameless brat... What's going on? Cow Tits is definitely a weird woman usually with her intelligence sucked away by the creature on her chest, but she's several times weirder today. Even if it's because she drank alcohol, she didn't act like this last time when she was drunk."

"Oh~ ...This must be your first time seeing it. What should I say? Konoha apparently loves plum brandy—Except there's a problem. For some reason, her drunken madness is especially serious when caused by drinking plum brandy. Like now."

"Drunken madness...?"

"Like speaking in a manner similar to her past self... But that doesn't cause any actual harm. What's problematic are situations like just now when you faced off against her. She apparently becomes more true to her natural instincts, or perhaps I should say that her emotions become more direct and upfront."

"Hmph, why don't you just say directly that she becomes a simple-minded fool? Do you really think you can satisfy me with just an explanation like this...? Then how am I gonna vent my anger from getting suddenly attacked? Jeez."

"Hey Fear, I already told you to be careful. If she hears what you just said, she could very well start yelling: 'Thou darest to ridicule me—!' Then it'll turn into a troublesome situation...! You must watch your language and behavior from this point onwards—"

"Ha~ryua~ki-kuun~"

Haruaki's back shuddered as he looked back. No way, did she overhear what they said just now?

"Y-Yes...? Konoha, what's up...?"

"Hmm~? Hmm~ fufufu. I am simply calling, nothing more~"

"R-Really?"

Haruaki breathed a sigh of relief. No matter what, his greatest worry was direct violence. So long as that could be prevented, he was willing to endure incomprehensible situations or slight inconveniences. Indeed, apart from violent behavior, just bring it on—Although perhaps this mindset of his was proving to be counterproductive.

"By the way... Hoo~ Verily... So hot..."

"Guh!?"

Without warning, Konoha started pulling at the collar of her kimono, flapping it to send wind towards her chest. In concert with the collar's in and out movement, her bulging bosom wobbled and shook, causing the visible area of exposed skin to become sometimes large, sometimes medium, but never small, exposing the root of the current problematic situation. Due to the angle, Haruaki was barely spared a view of the

protruding tips, but that was not enough for salvation. The attacks persisted.

"Oh...? ...Ufufu, perhaps it feeleth particularly hot because my sitting posture is wrong...? There."

"Woah!?"

As soon as Haruaki noticed that Konoha was glancing sideways at him in a profound manner, in the next instant, she boldly brought one knee up and started fanning the lower hem of her clothing. The corners of her lips curled slightly as she watched Haruaki in amusement.

The kimono's hem was dancing and turning over her long legs. Feeling a kind of premonition that he was about to see into the depths between her thighs, Haruaki hastily turned his back to Konoha. Next—

"Mufufufu! Haryuaki-kun is so pure and innocent~"

Haruaki heard light giggling behind him. He was completely being toyed with.

He could feel his cheeks turning red. Staying here further was only going to subject himself to more teasing. Hence, Haruaki decided to regroup.

"R-Right, I still haven't put away the groceries yet, they need to go into the fridge. Uh... Fear, come over and help me."

"Muu~ ...Hmph! Let alone helping you, I can actually do it by myself without any problems! But damn you, shameless brat, you're definitely thinking of performing a fan's job, to create wind for Cow Tits who's feeling hot! Because you'll get to see shameless things!"

"I-I'm definitely not thinking that! O-Okay, let's go! Konoha, why don't you wait here for now!?"

Hence, the two of them finally escaped the living room. Closing the sliding door behind him, Haruaki sighed deeply. A little displeased, Fear said:

"So... What's next?"

"That's exactly the problem I'm trying to solve right now. Let's hold a strategy meeting in the kitchen first. Oh, before that, let me go to the washroom first. I've been wanting to go on our way back."

"Just go if you need to. I'll start putting things away first."

Parting ways with Fear who entered the kitchen, Haruaki made his way to the washroom.

"Sigh~ What on earth should we do now...? Say, who exactly gave the plum brandy to Konoha? She couldn't possibly have bought it herself, right?"

At this moment, Haruaki suddenly found something on the floor in the corridor. He picked it up for a look.

"...Konoha's cardigan?"

Looking up in puzzlement, he discovered a trail of discarded clothing that formed a straight line on the corridor ahead. An attempt to imagine Konoha's actions yielded the following approximate process: drinking a glass of plum brandy in the living room → feeling hot after getting drunk → returning to her own room while undressing → taking out the kimono.

"Seriously, she really is completely different from her usual self."

The usual Konoha liked things to be neat and tidy. If anything, she was usually the one who scolded Haruaki and Fear for lazy behavior. Now that their roles were reversed, Haruaki found the situation a little refreshing.

Unable to leave them alone, Haruaki sequentially picked up the clothing dropped in the corridor. Socks, blouse, vest, skirt, and... And? A warning signal lighted up a beat too slow in his mind. He had already just picked up the skirt but there remained other articles in the corridor. After the skirt, what else would she take off? Due to going with the flow of the repeated picking up motion, he had reached out without thinking—But what exactly was the article of clothing he was currently picking up?

Haruaki almost looked down reflexively but dispelled that impulse with great difficulty. Right now, the ideal course of action was neither to look at the object in panic nor to confirm its soft texture with his fingers, nor to check the size of the piece of fabric resembling two bowls in shape, nor to confirm the color of the other piece of fabric, triangular in shape, which he had picked up simultaneously because they were piled together.

Indeed, under such circumstances, his best course of action was to quietly stuff these things into the cardigan and other clothing without taking a single look... Just as Haruaki took a deep breath to lift the fabric he was unable to view directly—

"Hohou~ So thou art interested in mine undergarments... Haryuaki-kun?"

"Uwahhhhh!"

Konoha suddenly pounced on his back. When did she approach without making a sound?

"Drinking alone... too boring... I came to find thee but discovered... Ufufu!"

"No, you've got the wrong idea, you're really mistaken! I was just picking up the clothing you scattered all over the floor."

Since he had just picked up two pieces of underwear, top and bottom, this meant that Konoha was undoubtedly wearing neither at the moment. In other words, this proved that she really was wearing nothing but a kimono.

But currently, Konoha's heavy objects, clad in nothing more than a sheer kimono, kept exerting pressure on Haruaki's back, concentrating virtually all of his consciousness there. All it took was subtle movement from Konoha and those two soft bulges would wobble and shake slightly, shifting in angle, shape and weight from the pressure. When Haruaki moved, presumably rubbing a certain sensitive spot, Konoha moaned seductively behind his ear: "Ah mmm...!"

"Stop, don't lean your entire weight on me, I can't move...!"

"I cannot move either, unable to walk a further step~ Mushushu. Thou shouldst carry me on thy back and walk~"

"You're definitely lying! Ah, hey, it's touching, touching me! Please stay still!"

Two snow-white arms reached out for the sides of his face and slowly turned Haruaki's head, causing him to face the side. He met gazes with Konoha whose head was positioned on his shoulder.

"Hey, compared to undergarments, dost thou... have something... thou desirest even more...?"

"No... L-Like I said, I'm not doing this because I'm interested in underwear! It's because they're dropped on the floor! Uh, right, I have to take these clothes to the changing area and go to the toilet, so I'd really appreciate it if you could let go of me straight away. Konoha, please—Eh!?"

"Toilet... The lavatory? Mmfu. Well then, shall we go...?"

"W-Why are you pushing me? I can go by myself, this is my home, you know!? Say, you've already abandoned the pretext of being unable to walk!?"

Konoha was originally hanging on his back like a slime, but now she suddenly exerted force through her legs and stepped forward. At the same time, she kept Haruaki's head firmly clamped in her arms.

Naturally, Haruaki could not possibly resist Konoha in strength. Hence escape was impossible. Konoha dragged him to the washroom and even opened the door.

"Come... Shall we enter together, ufufufu? I shall assist thee... Pulling down the zipper..."

"A-Anything but that, please!"

Although he had no idea what, Haruaki was certain that something earth-shaking was definitely going to happen once they entered the washroom. Absolutely. Just as he resisted with all the strength he could muster from his entire body—

"Wha... W-W-What... What is going on here!?"

The savior—or new embers of chaos—appeared at the end of the corridor. Probably hearing the commotion, Fear had run out of the kitchen. Instantly, she figured out the situation.

"You've finally shown your true colors... Then I'll treat you to a taste of your own medicine! Immorality et cetera—!"

Taking out a Rubik's cube from her pocket, Fear transformed it into the torture wheel, raising it high above her head as she rushed at Haruaki and Konoha. Presumably forced to react, Konoha swiftly released Haruaki, turned and charged. A number of creaks sounded from the corridor's floorboards in succession. Fear threw the wheel while stepping forward. Konoha swayed left and right, evading. Fear continued to follow up with offense. Lazily lifting her free hand that was not holding the bottle of brandy, Konoha blocked Fear's attack using a karate chop—

Engaged in a contest of strength, the two girls were locked in a close-range battle, glaring viciously at each other.

"I forgot to add just now... The three words: (Death by Wheel)...!"

"Hmm~? How odd~ Haryuaki-kun mentioned that thou, little lass, art not mine enemy..."

"Hmph, but you could very well be mine...!"

"I see~ ...Then in self-defense, I must counterattack... Is that so...? Burp."

Another battle was on the verge of erupting again. Haruaki gulped hard. He must once again step up to stop them. But could he stop them? Unlike just now, this had already developed into a physical altercation.

Knowing it was futile, Haruaki still could not help but hope that he could rely on something, wishing someone could help. He was not going to be greedy. As long as this situation could be kept under control, it would be fine. Was there anyone who could stop these two girls from fighting, anyone who could reduce these two girls' intent to fight—?

Suddenly, she appeared.

"I'm~ home~ I've been working hard today too... Oh my?"

Hearing the front door opening, Haruaki turned too look.

Standing there—was of course, the petite black-haired young girl, namely, Kuroe.

She had returned home inexplicably earlier than usual, but probably due to her feelings of exhaustion or boredom, the opening hours of the beauty parlor, Dan-no-ura, changed freely on whim according to her mood.

Kuroe had apparently yet to understand the current situation, simply using her usual blank eyes to stare at the two girls who were locked in a contest of strength between a torture wheel and a karate chop. Then she tilted her head adorably in puzzlement. But just at that moment—

"Nwah... Huh? Hey, stand still, damn Cow Tits! Where are you going?"

Konoha had suddenly abandoned the stalemate, causing Fear to fall forward. Completely ignoring Fear, Konoha swayed as she walked over to Kuroe at the entrance.

"E-Eh? Umm, Kono-san, today you're looking different from usual—"

"Ufu, of course I know thy identity~ Kuroe-shan! Mufufu... Seeing thee anew... Sure enough... Extremely! Adorable! Yes!"

Smiling in a terrifying manner, Konoha moved her ten fingers, exhaling breath that reeked strongly of alcohol.

Seeing Konoha slowly approaching her, even Kuroe finally seemed to sense the nightmare's presence. Making an unmoving smile that looked like a mask, she said in a stiff voice:

"Ahahaha. Thank you—Well then, I just remembered that I still have something to do, so please excuse me."

"Huhee, thou thinkst thou canst escape from me—? Uriuri!"

"Wah—!"

Konoha hugged Kuroe tightly and began to rub their faces together forcefully, apparently forgetting Fear who was watching this scene with a stunned expression. Sure enough, when in drunken madness, Konoha was rather capricious in her emotions, making it impossible to predict her behavior.

In any case, Haruaki thanked his lucky stars that an imminent conflict was successfully evaded.

Good job, Kuroe! Haruaki mentally made a thumbs-up gesture, praising the arrival of the savior.

However, the savior was soon reaching a state of nihility akin to a kitten that had been under constant caress, collapsing limply in Konoha's arms.

Part 3

"Using money to punish a person...? Hmm~ That local official's facial expression is truly evil to the extreme. Burp, must be Tokugawa's descendant, how truly displeasing..."

Konoha was in the living room watching television, muttering to herself. At the same time, she was alternating between drinking plum brandy and eating mouthfuls of food to accompany the alcohol. The snacks were prepared by Haruaki using existing ingredients that were ready on hand.

The trio of Haruaki, Fear and Kuroe were sitting at the side of the table opposite to her, suppressing their breaths. Despite making a continuous stream of grumbling comments, Konoha was completely engrossed in the television. Now was the only time to hold a strategy meeting.

"...I get it now. Kono-san always enters a drunken madness after drinking plum brandy. This is like the effect of catnip on cats and limited editions on collectors, a substance that makes her lose rationality especially easily, isn't it?"

"Exactly. By the way, Kuroe, your hair is all messed up."

"Ugh, my head still feels hot from all the rubbing Kono-san did for so long... I was beginning to think the friction was going to make fire."

Kuroe's hair moved sluggishly, fixing her hairstyle on its own. Through the slow movements of her hair, one could tell how utterly exhausted she was.

Glancing at Konoha while she was watching television, Haruaki said quietly:

"So... The problem we need to think about is simply what are we going to do next."

"Isn't that simple!? Right now, she's just a shameless bitch who's full of herself, doing whatever she wants, reeking of alcohol, a total eyesore! She must be dealt with right away! I propose a simple solution that can be captured in merely three words. Namely, force! Unconscious! Rope! ...Hoho, that's all!"

Fear was looking at Konoha with shining eyes akin to that of savage hound. Seeing that, Haruaki sighed.

"You're going to resort to force? In my view, I'm hoping that you won't execute the kind of plan that's like capturing Konoha, something a bit gentler would be better..."

"But Ficchi's plan isn't totally unworkable as a general direction. I don't really think Kono-san can be easily subdued in her current state, but I don't think she'll listen obediently even if we asked her to stop drinking. Also, look how she's taking small sips at a time so the consumption rate is kind of slow... Waiting for her to finish might be slightly challenging."

"Yeah... You have a point."

Hence, Kuroe turned her face slightly and said:

"I think your answer is very vague... Haru, are there extenuating circumstances forcing you to favor gentle solutions?"

"Damn you, shameless brat, you haven't been bribed by Cow Tits already, have you!? Oh, that reminds me, what happened to that underwear and clothing you were holding in the corridor just now...? Did she bribe you with that!?"

"Of course not, I already put the clothes in the changing area for sure!"

"Then why not!? I won't have mercy on you if you dare hide things from me!"

"Sheesh... But it's nothing so compelling as extenuating circumstances..."

Haruaki looked towards Konoha again. The story on television must be entering a climax. She was leaning forward slightly, staring at the screen intently.

"Yes, right there! Go—... Wow, the hairpin stabbed in with a goosh! A truly fitting death for a corrupt official! Kufufu, a toast to celebrate..."

Konoha slapped her thigh repeatedly then took a sip of brandy, grinning from side to side, then burped, exhaling deeply. Seeing the official go limp on screen, she laughed heartily again.

Yeah, disregarding the video content she was laughing about...

She really looked quite happy... Haruaki thought.

"How should I put this...? Recently, it's been quite rare to see Konoha laughing to her heart's content like this. If I think back carefully, it's very seldom for her to put down everything to have fun without reserve to begin with. She's always helping with house chores and going out to work part-time on occasion. She's definitely keeping her guard up all the time to watch out for suspicious characters nearby... It does seem quite tough for her in various ways, so I was wondering if she might be accumulating a lot of stress."

"Hmm, now that you mention it, that seems to be true. Kono-san isn't someone who complains or says discouraging things."

"...So what you mean is let her continue drinking in drunken stupor?"

Fear frowned and pouted, whispering in discontent.

"As much as I'd like to do that, allowing her to stay in this mode endlessly will cause too much damage to us... So I'm hoping for a compromise and

resolve the situation gently. Rather than waging total war to render her unconscious and tie her up, I'd like something more natural. Since she's already like this, it can't be helped so I'm hoping to bring Konoha back to normal happily after she dissipates her stress completely, something like that at least..."

My suggestion probably has too much wishful thinking... Haruaki scratched his head. But after looking up slightly, he noticed Kuroe was making a faint wry smile with a gentle expression. On the other hand, Fear was pouting, facing another direction while muttering: "Jeez... This guy is always making such a shameless face, every single time..."

"That's so like Haru's style. In that case, I'll do as you say."

"Hmph, I can't stand this. But precisely because of that, the shameless brat is the shameless brat... N-No wait, I haven't accepted it yet! If you must have your way no matter what, it's not like I can't negotiate with you. Just give me ten... No, twenty rice crackers and it's a deal!"

"Sigh, no helping it. Although it feels like highway robbery, I'll pay you afterwards."

"Great, deal sealed. Can't be helped, we'll have to go for gentler means."

"A gentle solution huh... But that depends on what extent counts as gentle. Oh right, Haru, you knew all along that Kono-san turns into this state whenever she drinks plum brandy, right?"

"Yeah. In the past, before either of you came to this home, something similar happened once. I don't quite remember the details but Old Pops and I definitely suffered tragically. That's why, afterwards, we vowed from the bottom of our hearts that plum brandy is the one thing that Konoha must not touch. Not even a drop."

"Since something similar happened before, you must have learnt at least one or two useful things. Do you recall anything? Like being susceptible to pain caused by reciting prayers to her or being unable to stand the smell of garlic."

"Are you treating her as some kind of demon!?"

"By the way, how did you clean up the mess back then? Did you simply endure the whole thing or did you use some kind of special method to turn Kono-san back to normal...? This is very important."

Hearing Kuroe's question, Haruaki tilted his head, a deep furrow appearing on his brow as he concentrated. However—

"Hmm~ Actually, that's exactly what I've been thinking for a while now, but I can't recall what happened at all. How strange, it's like my memories were sealed by someone. It's really totally blank for just that one patch..."

"M-Most likely, it was a traumatic experience for Haru in his childhood. Probably a defense mechanism activated to protect his heart and soul... In that case, don't force yourself to remember it!"

While Kuroe said that, what appeared to be cold sweat dripped from her. Whatever, Haruaki decided that there was no point in focusing his attention on that matter since he might remember all of a sudden.

"So, back to the issue at hand, what exactly are we doing next? I don't want to just keep tolerating her tyranny. We must find a way to return her to normal, gently."

"Hmm. Ultimately, what should we do to make Konoha sober?"

Haruaki pondered. Sobering Konoha. The simplest and most basic method was time. No matter how utterly drunk, everyone would definitely go sober after some amount of time—But it was a totally different issue if they kept drinking continually.

In other words—

Conversely, she would definitely grow sober gradually provided she stopped drinking.

"Her drunken stupor persists because she keeps drinking nonstop... The first goal is to stop her from drinking more plum brandy. But there's still a lot of brandy left in that bottle. Since that's the case—"

"The bottle must be taken away."

Kuroe declared. The trio looked at one another and nodded.

The battle plan's direction was decided. In other words, to stop Konoha from drinking more plum brandy, they were going to take the bottle away.

"But if all we do is grab it, I think she'll immediately snatch it back. Maybe it's better if we secretly replace the plum brandy inside with water or fruit juice. In her current state, I don't think Kono-san will notice."

"Hmm, if the brandy can be replaced secretly, that'll be the best. But that requires finding an opportunity to make the switch first."

"If Cow Tits spots us during the stealing process, we might have to resort to a crash and burn approach, pouring the bottle's contents out... But we'll just have to adapt to the situation when the time comes."

"'Operation Secret Bottle Swap' sounds too direct as a name, too risky. Just in case, we should use a codename so that it doesn't matter if she overhears. In other words, this is 'Operation Beauties Preparing to Substitute Bottles Secretly', shortened as—Yes! Let's call it Operation Substitution Beauties!"

"I'm a guy, okay? Say, I don't see why you have to put in the word 'beauties' deliberately."

"Haru, don't sweat the small details~ I think this plan should be divided into four major phases. The first phase is 'preparing the substitute bottle,' the second phase is 'taking the bottle from Kono-san's hands,' the third phase is 'cautiously but boldly swapping bottles' and the final and fourth phase is 'after the supply is cut, Kono-san sobers up.'"

"Yeah. In other words, once these phases are completed in sequence, victory will naturally come into view. Then let's go. So, the specific details..."

Konoha had been keeping them in the corner of her view all this time. While they were discussing the details for Operation Substitution Beauties, Konoha suddenly turned her head to look at them. The trio instantly held their breaths.

"...Staring~"

A slanted, glaring stare. Despite laughing heartily at the corrupt official's death just now, she suddenly seemed quite displeased. Taking a sip of plum brandy, Konoha said:

"Hmm~ ...Burp. Right now, ye... were... whispering...?"

"N-No we weren't. What whispering? We were just chatting casually. That's right, just chatting casually."

"Ostracizing... me... Just the three of ye...?"

Saying that, Konoha pouted childishly. The usual Konoha would never make such a face, so it was quite a refreshing sight. But now was not the time to be enjoying this refreshing sense. Rather, it was an unprecedented crisis.

"W-We're not ostracizing you."

"..."

Konoha pouted even more forcefully, her hazy gaze penetrating the three of them in sequence, like an underworld judge trying to expose lies based on their facial expressions. Then—

"Seiza."

"...Wha?"

"Sei~za~! Make haste! Here!"

Konoha patted the tatami next to her. Her eyes were already staring straight at him.

"Hey, why? What did we do?"

"Shush, Fear! Anyway, let's avoid angering Konoha for now. Now that we've finally decided what we're going to do, things will get very troublesome if we anger her. Hey, Kuroe too... Woah, that's fast!"

Unbelievable, instantaneous movement. Clearly next to Haruaki just a moment ago, Kuroe was now sitting formally in seiza posture at the location indicated.

"I've already decided to submit totally to the current Kono-san in non-resistance."

Konoha's displeased gaze and intimidating aura did not go away. Haruaki and Fear obediently sat down in seiza to follow Kuroe's suit. Sitting down forcefully in a cross-legged posture in front of the trio, Konoha took a sip of plum brandy and swept her sharp gaze over the group.

"Very well... So, do something... interesting... Amuse me!"

"Wait, Konoha, why are you giving this kind of order suddenly?"

"Muhmm~? I care not! Dost thou have a problem with that!? This ought to be possible if ye are not ostracizing me! Hence, ye ought to do it!"

"What unreasonable logic..."

"Ye cannot... Huh? Then sure enough, ye are ostracizing me...?"

Konoha's eyes were shimmering with the dim light of loneliness. Inexplicably, Haruaki felt a strong sense of guilt.

"Th-That's wrong, we're definitely not ostracizing you. It's just that we're wondering how to amuse you!"

"Puha~ Then allow me to decide! Hmm~"

"Letting this drunkard decide what we're going to do? That's definitely an extremely scary game...!"

Probably hearing this murmur, Konoha locked her gaze on Fear, thus deciding the first victim.

"In that case~ First, little lass, thou~"

Everyone gulped at once. Thinking up something that no one could guess, Konoha finally laughed in a commanding manner and said:

"Yes—strip!"

"I-I strongly refuse! What kind of demand is that? It's too shameless!"

Flushed red in the face, Fear leaned forward. However, Konoha laughed greatly while shaking her upper body.

"Hyaha, surely I jest... Well then, pour the drink. Little lass, thou shalt be responsible for pouring!"

This could very well be a great opportunity. Haruaki and Kuroe made eyes towards Fear. Since she was to pour the drink, it implied that the bottle will be handed over to Fear. Although they might not be able to execute the plan immediately, for the remainder of the operation, this was very crucial.

Fear nodded lightly. Then clenching her fists, she slowly stood up.

"We'll have no future if we don't defeat her as soon as possible. I've no choice but to step up. Haruaki, Kuroe, I'm counting on you guys for the rest...!"

Fear was making a face that matched these exaggerated words, like a stoic warrior heading off towards sacrifice for the sake of the greater good, filled with tragic determination.

Part 4

"Hey, the glass is empty..."

"Muu... I know."

"Verily, thou ought to pour more gently. As one would expect, the little lass is clumsy... Haha!"

"Gr... Grrrrrr...!"

Endure, Fear, this is for the sake of our plan...! Haruaki transmitted his thoughts to Fear while she poured the brandy. Currently, Fear was still obeying Konoha quietly, but her internal stress was definitely building up from being forced to pour drinks like a servant for Konoha whom she was always antagonizing every day.

On the other hand, Kuroe was not present. Konoha was currently using the ordinary glass that was originally knocked over in the living room (probably the glass used for her first drink), asking Fear to pour her a drink. Hence, just earlier, Kuroe had rubbed her hands together and said: "I must say that this kind of cheap glass is not fit for Kono-san to use! I will go search for a classier wine glass, please wait, hehehe!" Then she fled the living room. Of course, that was merely a pretext. Right now, Kuroe should be in the process of putting phase one of the aforementioned Operation Substitution Beauties into action with utmost urgency, in other words, preparing the substitute bottle.

Kuroe had said that she was going to a nearby convenience store to buy crunchy plums and plum juice, which would take her some time to return. Hence, it was necessary to have Fear stall for time first.

As a side note, Haruaki had made several attempts to leave the living room so as to assist in the first phase of the operation, but for some reason, Konoha would exude an intense aura of displeasure every single time, leaving him no choice but to give up. As a result, all he could do was watch over Fear while pondering what "amusing" thing he could do when his turn arrived. However, Konoha kept glancing at him, smiling very happily, which

meant that he was already serving as some kind of existence to accompany her consumption of alcohol.

But perhaps wanting to try other dishes to accompany her drinking from time to time, Konoha suddenly looked at Fear, staring intently.

"W-What?"

"Little lass... Thy hair... Very pretty, isn't it? Since thou art free right now... Come come come, come a little closer... Burp. Worry not, I shan't do anything bad to thee."

"Ugh... Ughhhhh... Ughhhhhhhhhh. This is terrifying, too terrifying..."

Probably killing time, Konoha picked up Fear's silver hair and started to braid it nimbly. From an observer's standpoint, this was a heart-warming scene that would bring a smile to anyone's face, but considering the two girls' usual relationship, all one could say was this was truly a rare scene. Fear also looked like she had no idea how to react, her back simply trembled nonstop.

Soon after, Fear's hair was rendered in the same style as Konoha's, a braid on just one side. The elastic string used to tie her braid came from the tatami floor where it had been dropped earlier, in other words, the string that was originally used to tie Konoha's hair.

"Behold, the same as I now... Mmmph. Haryuaki-kun... What dost thou think?"

"I-I think it looks great. Umm... Just like sisters! Hahaha."

"Damn you, shameless brat, stop saying things that give me goosebumps! I can't believe you're such a sycophant...!"

After hearing Haruaki's response, delivered with a smile aiming to please, Fear went slightly red in the face and glared vicious at him. However, Haruaki did not consider it flattery. Rather, he was simply saying honestly what he felt.

Looking contentedly at Fear who was now sporting the same hairstyle as her, Konoha then licked her own lips for some reason.

"Hmm~ Now that I look at thee, little lass, thou art... quite adorable too..."

"Wha!? No, wait, what are you trying to do!? Cow Tits, cut it out now! Get away from me! Don't hug me with your arms around my neck! Don't put your face against me! A-Are you trying to do to me what you did to Kuroe!? That's totally demonic, completely demoralizing—!"



"Hmm~? Thou sayst... What I did to Kuroe-shan... Thou meanst like this...?"

"Hoahhhhhhhh!"

Konoha pressed their faces tightly together and started grinding. Since Konoha had Fear's head firmly in her grasp, all Fear could do was keep leaning back.

Then Konoha's face slowly moved down along Fear's cheek—

"Ohoh~ How truly smooth, both smooth and tender, also full of elasticity... Almost like a steamed bun. Mmmph, looketh so delicious..."

Then she opened her mouth and bit Fear lightly on the neck.

"Eeeeeeeek!? I'm getting eaten—!"

Fear's toleration probably reached a limit finally. With a great shake of her back, she suddenly pushed Konoha's arms away with all her strength and fled in desperation.

Nonchalantly using one hand to catch the bottle of plum brandy that Fear had tossed into the air, Konoha looked in the veranda's direction where Fear had escaped, grumbling softly in discontent.

"What~ How boring..."

However, just as Konoha was about to take another sip from the bottle, someone forcefully opened the living room's sliding door.

"No~ I have already witnessed Ficchi's way of survival...! Now it's my turn to enter stage and do my best!"

Kuroe had returned. Haruaki quietly sat up and looked behind her—There it was. At a dead angle outside of Konoha's view, Kuroe's hair was currently holding a shape resembling a bottle.

(Ohoh, that's the light of our hope... As reliable as a legendary holy sword!)

Most likely noticing his gaze, Kuroe made a thumbs up sign behind her back. The first phase of the operation had been accomplished flawlessly.

Next, all would be fine once they accomplish the second phase of Operation Substitution Beauties, taking the bottle from Konoha's hand, and the third phase, cautiously but boldly swapping bottles.

Once that was done, it would leave only the fourth and final phase, sobering up now that the supply was cut. Then all would be well as they quietly waited for the happy future to arrive—

"So! Since Ficchi ran away, it's my turn to pour for you, Kono-san. See, I've found a glassy wine glass just for you. So please hand me that bottle you have there—"

"Oh... How wonderful. Be that as it may, simply having two people in a row pour brandy for me, I have tired of it. I shall accept thy wine glass with gratitude but thou shalt do something else, Kuroe-shan~..."

"Guh!"

The operation was instantly stalled. Nevertheless, Kuroe quickly drummed up her spirits again.

"S-So, Kono-san, how about a massage? My hair massage is considered number one in the world, you'll be brought to ecstasy!"

"Oh... A massage? Experiencing a massage while having a drink, truly extravagant enjoyment... I shall be counting on thee."

"Understood—!"

Kuroe made her way around to Konoha's back. Her hair fluttered lightly and separated into many bundles, which then wrapped themselves around Konoha's body as she stretched her legs and sat down on the tatami floor. Neck. Arms. Cleavage. Thighs. Then the bundles of hair contracted in an unhurried manner, beginning to massage Konoha's muscles.

"Oho, hoho... 'Tis truly... excellent."

"Thank you for your appreciation~"

Although it seemed like a good opportunity on first glance, Kuroe did not something as reckless as trying to tie up Konoha using the hair. This was because Konoha, being a Japanese sword, countered Kuroe's hair completely. As long as Konoha had the intent, she could easily sever Kuroe's hair.

In order to look out for opportunities to act, Kuroe continued to use her hair to massage Konoha. Relaxing her entire body, Konoha entrusted herself to Kuroe's hair. The hair going past her neck was rubbing her shoulders, causing Konoha to exhale. Hair was lifting up her thigh lightly; movement in

the hair passing between her cleavage caused her bosom to wobble—Haruaki frantically focused his attention on Kuroe instead of Konoha. Someone not in the know would probably mistake the sight for that of a voluptuous kimono-clad beauty in tight bondage. That was how dangerous this scene looked.

"Mmm! ...Ah ...There... Lower slightly..."

"Okay~ Leave it to me. Just relax your body."

At this moment, a new bundle of hair rose up silently from Kuroe's head. Her gaze also turned slightly sharp. The bundle of hair was slowly approaching its target—The bottle of plum brandy held in Konoha's right hand.

She's doing it? Haruaki quietly clenched his fist below the table.

The second phase, taking the bottle from Konoha's hand, was reaching an impasse, hence Kuroe had decided to skip the second phase, going for the operation's phase three directly.

Indeed, Konoha was currently a captive of pleasure at the moment. Provided Kuroe was able to take the bottle swiftly and swap it with the substitute bottle behind her, the operation would succeed. Although evading Konoha's discovery was very difficult, it was fine so long as the bottle could be taken out of Konoha's view for an instant. Once that was done, there were many possible excuses, such as finding the bottle getting in the way of the massaging or wanting to use her hair to pour brandy.

All Haruaki could do was pray. I'm counting on you, Kuroe...!

The bundle of hair crept slowly towards the bottle. Twenty centimeters remained, ten centimeters, five centimeters—

But just at this moment, Konoha suddenly lifted the bottle to pour brandy into her glass. The hair missed.

"...Hmm?"

"W-What's up?"

Kuroe stopped the bundle of hair from moving as though saying "nothing weird's going on, this hair is for massaging!", smiling in a pleasing manner. Looking back, Konoha shook her head lightly.

"No... Thou continuest."

"U-Understood~"

The mission resumed. The hair slowly approached but again, just before making contact, the bottle was moved. The hair froze.

"...Hmm?"

"Hmm? W-What's wrong?"

Then again, the hair slowly approached, the bottle was moved, the hair froze. Konoha looked back; breaking out in cold sweat, Kuroe smiled in an effort to please... It was almost the same as a game of Red Light, Green Light.

(W-What should I do?)

Hence, Haruaki came up with a new plan, namely phase two point five, diverting Konoha's attention.

At this rate, Konoha was going to find out any time. Her attention must be diverted, even for a few seconds, so as to create an opening. To this end, what could Haruaki help—?

"..."

Haruaki instantly had an idea but it was accompanied by a number of problems. However, making sacrifices for the greater good was the most important. Right now, he had been simply sitting in one spot, serving as Konoha's accompanying snack for her alcohol drinking. Haruaki could not let Fear and Kuroe be the only ones working hard. Knowing how risky this was, he still went ahead, hoping it could provide some slight effect as cover—

Just as Haruaki resolved himself, Konoha ended up being the one to speak up.

"Hmm... Ahff... Oh, yes yes. A hair massage might be nice, but I still desire human hands... So Haryuaki-kun, come~ Give me a massage... Burp. Kuroe-shan shall continue to focus on the hair~"

"—Got it."

Haruaki decided to help in massaging to divert Konoha's attention. As much as possible, he tried to chat with her and engage her attention.

Konoha's invitation turned out to match his intentions, but the risk hidden in this act had not gone down at all.

Konoha was sitting with one leg extended straight while the other leg was slight bent and raised. Looking down at her extended leg, she said:

"Well then, start massaging here! Thou shouldst use both hands to press forcefully..."

"Y-Yes."

Haruaki got up and shifted over by her leg, moving on his knees. The thighs extending out from kimono's overlapping portion were snow-white in complexion and voluptuous. Somehow, the blackness of the hair wrapped around the thighs seemed to be further emphasizing the pristine paleness.

Don't think anything, don't ponder anything, this is only phase two point five of the operation! —Haruaki reminded himself while touching Konoha's thigh with both hands, next to where Kuroe's hair was wrapped. Her thigh felt supple with great elasticity, yet so soft that it seemed to melt. Her skin was smooth and tender as though the concept of friction did not exist. Thigh. Thigh! No! Don't think! Shut down your mind! That's why I said this is too dangerous!

"Ah... Mmm... There... Press there..."

Haruaki applied pressure, causing his fingertips to sink into the supple flesh. Trembling, surrounded by warmth, his fingers bounced back from the elasticity. Konoha straightened her other leg and Haruaki shifted towards it. Bending her knees slightly, Konoha arched her back and exhaled scorching moans.

"Ah... Ah... Such pleasure, such pleasure... Harder... Haryuaki-kuun..."

Hearing these moans, Haruaki felt his inner depths almost about to explode in heat. I'm at my limit, I feel like I'm almost reaching my limit. Kuroe, you're still not done?

"Uh... Uh... Let's switch to another spot next! How about the shoulders!? Konoha?"

"Ah mmm! Hooh... Mmm... Shoulders are nice too... Then thou shalt kneel directly here."

"Umm, it's better to do it from behind if I'm massaging your shoulders..."

"Right. Here."

"...Okay."

Inexplicably, Haruaki was coerced into massaging her shoulder, face to face. Reaching towards her shoulders, Haruaki massaged them together with Kuroe's hair. Staring past Konoha's head, he used his gaze to ask Kuroe: "Still not yet?" Kuroe answered with her eyes: "Make a little more of an opening!"

"Uh... Dear customer, is this okay?"

"Hmm... Hmm, faster... wilt be fine... Indeed, one, two... One, two. Do thy best... Do thy best... Ahhhhhh..."

Behind partially slid down glasses, Konoha's hazy eyes were staring at Haruaki. With every vibration, her face would shake rhythmically in concert with her breathing. Not only that, the collar of the kimono hanging on Konoha's shoulder was slowly beginning to loosen and shift outward, fully exposing her naked shoulder to open air—

"Hold it, pause! Your clothing!"

"Worry not, now is... the critical moment... Massage, massage more... A little... Mmm. Change the location, lower down this time..."

"Lower down...? But lower down from the shoulder is no longer the shoulder!"

Using her hand that was holding the wine glass, Konoha pushed Haruaki's arm, applying pressure to force it down. Currently massaging her shoulder from the front, his hand was gradually shifted down. Like climbing a sheer cliff, Haruaki's finger caught her collarbone. He was about to fall down soon. Then the landscape began to slope. The slope grew steeper and steeper, bringing more and more soft sensations, then it was no longer the shoulder—

"Nooooooooo!"

Mustering all the strength in his body, Haruaki twisted his body together with his arm, causing his fingertips to escape the devil's gradients. No sooner had he breathed a sigh of relief, Haruaki lost balance from forcefully breaking free and fell over, face first. Consequently, his nose was greeted with the soft sensation of Konoha's outstretched legs. The thighs he had been massaging moments earlier was right before his eyes.

Resembling shelled hard-boiled eggs, her smooth, white, pristine and tender skin occupied all of Haruaki's view. His breath bounced back against that swathe of skin. Somehow, it felt like his lips might have kissed her slightly too.

"S-Sorry, Konoha!"

"Ufu, worry not... Thou must be tired, Haryuaki-kun...? Thou mayst... rest here for now... Mmph. Lay thyself... upon my lap..."

Konoha threw away the wine glass and used her freed hand to hold Haruaki's head securely. Her other hand was still holding the bottle. Taking a sip of brandy, Konoha shifted onto her knees to sit in seiza posture. Due to his head in her grasp, Haruaki could not escape—He had tried turning his head to resist but in vain.

Since Konoha was not wearing underwear, combined with the fact that her flimsy kimono was wide open, Haruaki did not dare to imagine what might happen if he were to look in Konoha's direction while lying on her lap. Frantically, Haruaki closed his eyes, avoiding the answer to this question by the slimmest of margins. Although he seemed to have caught sight of something, surely he had seen nothing. He saw nothing due to the shadows, definitely.

"U-Uh, Konoha-san, how much longer do I need to stay in this position...?"

"Until I feel that thou is comfortable and hast recovered thy energy completely, Haryuaki-kun..."

"I-I'm fully recharged already!"

"No, not yet... Oh, I recall now... Under such circumstances, there happeneth to be a method that could allow you to recharge completely, Haryuaki-kun..."

Haruaki turned his head even more slowly, stopping at a position where he could at least open his eyes. Opening his eyelids in trepidation, he found that his view was directly straight up at the almost overflowing bulges. He had no choice but to convince himself that this was at least better than just now. Nevertheless, he was struck by a rising sense of foreboding. Konoha was currently looking down between the two bulges at him, bearing an exceptionally seductive smile—

"Haryuaki-kun... Hast thou heard of seaweed sake...? Naturally, 'tis not alcohol brewed from seaweed, fufu, but a very fun manner of drinking alcohol..."^[2]

Although Haruaki had no idea what the term meant, he had a very bad feeling about it. His sense of foreboding also told him that it was not something he should know about.

Just as he was falling into the abyss of despair, Haruaki could sense something moving at high speed behind Konoha's head.

(K-Kuroe...!)

Konoha was bowing her head down, looking at Haruaki as though pressing him down with her gaze. In other words, the bottle was completely outside her field of view. Without missing out on this perfect, momentary opportunity, Kuroe made her hair move rapidly at once.

It was about to end. The third phase, cautiously but boldly swapping bottles—It was about to end!

Haruaki could see the future.

This was going to happen next—"What~" The bottle taken, Konoha would look back to find Kuroe with a bottle in her hand, smiling in an effort to please, saying: "Let me pour you another~" except that the bottle had been swapped already—Perfect. Thank goodness!

However—

"H-Huh...?"

While Kuroe exclaimed in puzzlement, something fell to the tatami floor with a rustle.

Instantly, Haruaki discovered that his head had regained freedom. In other words, the hand that Konoha had tasked with securing his head's position was now assigned a new mission. With a feeling of despair, Haruaki sat up to confirm what had happened—

Konoha was staring in surprise at her hand in a karate chop. Then she stared at Kuroe's hair that had fallen onto the tatami floor. Then scratching her head with that hand, she nonchalantly said to Kuroe, who was frozen stiff:

"Thou shouldst be more careful~ Burp. If thou movest beyond a certain speed in my surroundings... I shall consider it an attack, thereby counterattacking automatically~"

"O-Oh~ I didn't know. B-But why?"

"Something like a habit... Because arrows used to fly frequently in the past... But why didst thou reach out with thy hair towards this bottle with such alacrity...?"

Konoha took a sip of brandy first.

Then narrowing her eyes, she continued to question:

"Mayhap—Thou intendest to take away mine alcohol...?"

She was starting to exude a faint aura of coldness that caused others to tremble. Kuroe frantically waved her hands before her chest.

"No no, of course not! That couldn't possibly happen at all! I was just trying to help you in making seaweed sake, Kono-san! Okay, let's do it now!"

(I-I can't believe you sold out your soul—!)

Kuroe threw Haruaki an apologetic glance of "sorry," but Haruaki had no idea how to respond with his eyes.

In any case, due to the tiny commotion just now, Konoha seemed to have heightened her guard. Was she going to let go of the bottle so easily again? Even if they could swap rapidly, the current Konoha was going to counterattack automatically—Too scary. Perhaps the operation needed amendments. But where? How should the phases of the plan be modified?

Just at this time, the doorbell's "dingdong" was heard at the entrance. Konoha trembled once and looked up.

"Oh, speaking of which, right... It hath arrived? Mufufu!"

Her mood suddenly improved for some reason. She also seemed to have forgotten the mysterious alcohol of seaweed sake.

"Uh, Konoha... What has arrived?"

"I was just thinking that snacks to accompany the brandy did not feel filling enough... So this is something more fulfilling for the stomach. Yes, very well, let us go pick it up together. 'Tis might be too much to carry unless

everyone is mobilized... Come, follow me now. Same for the little lass over there~"

"Ugh!?"

Returning at some point without Haruaki noticing, Fear was currently hiding behind a pillar, secretly peeking into the living room from the veranda. After Fear stepped into the living room in resignation, the trio looked at one another.

Although they were totally puzzled—

The commotion from Konoha's drunken madness was apparently spreading beyond the confines of the living room at last.

Part 5

It was very much in Konoha's style.

But why? —Haruaki could not help but feel baffled.

Why? For what reason?

In the Yachi home's garden, which had been peaceful and quiet until today—

Why was a whole pig roast currently set up?

While the sun was about to set, the dusk air in the garden was filled with an appetizing aroma.

Dry twigs were cracking intensely. The red flames seemed especially bright against the sunset. Dressed in a red kimono, the girl was standing on the rotisserie platform, rotating the massive spit skewering the pig, giggling to herself.

"Fufufu... What an excellent aroma... It shall be done anon..."

Honestly speaking, this scene very much resembled the venue of a Witches' Sabbath. The witch was taking sips of plum brandy occasionally on whim. As a side note, a young girl who looked almost like a witch's servant was nimbly and industriously helping by collecting firewood from the forest in the back one moment, preparing a bucket of water for extinguishing the fire in the next. Perhaps Kuroe was still looking for a

chance to swap bottles, but it was also possible that she was only doing her best to survive.

"Hmm... Looks she must have ordered it before we returned home."

Fear commented while watching the Witches' Sabbath in front of her. Next to her, Haruaki spoke in dejection:

"Looks like it. I'm guessing she must have made unreasonable demands to the butcher..."

"Yeah, the man who delivered the pig looked like he was about to cry."

"The same goes for the rotisserie equipment. Also, the pig was already almost done roasting to begin with. She probably decided that roasting the raw pig would take too much time... which is why Konoha asked the butcher to prepare a pig roast that only needed slight reheating, what outrageous demands. The butcher also said that he'll bring us the bill tomorrow after calculating costs... Woah, I'm really getting scared now...!"

"Hey Haruaki, I'm equally said too but I need to point out something that's gonna make you shiver in greater terror. That Cow Tits is making another call right now. No idea who, though."

"What—!?"

Konoha was indeed holding a cellphone against her ear, probably borrowed from Kuroe, talking to someone while rotating the whole pig roast. Just as Haruaki decided he must stop her, it was already too late. Hanging up with a contented look, Konoha tossed the cellphone back to Kuroe.

"Th-This could very well be a crisis for the home budget..."

"I just hope she didn't tack on an order for a whole cow roast. We can only pray."

Fear crossed her arms, wholly displeased, then continued:

"That girl is showing no signs of sobering up at all. In the end, only phase one of Operation Substitution Beauties was completed, right? Even if a fake bottle was prepared, it's useless unless we can make the swap."

"I know that but I get the feeling that phase two, making her let go of the bottle, and phase three, actually swapping bottles, seem to be getting

harder and harder... Maybe we should come up with a new plan from the ground up?"

"Jeez, things have become such a pain all because you're spoiling her too much. Whatever letting her relieve stress, you're indulging Cow Tits too much! You should scold her more strictly! Or resort to force decisively!"

"Am I spoiling her too much...? Hmm, but it's really my true feelings that I'd like her to have fun without holding back or relieve her stress on occasion. But it's also because Konoha's current state is bringing back past memories a bit... That's why I slightly missed the chance to stop her."

"...Bringing back memories huh?"

"Yeah~ When she first arrived at this home, the Konoha back then was completely different from the current Konoha you know. The way she is right now, it makes me feel like I'm looking through an old photo album."

"You've been together for so long... since a time old enough to reminisce over. Hmph..."

Haruaki did not quite catch Fear's quiet murmuring. Turning to look at her, Haruaki found Fear pouting and looking off somewhere else.

"Hmm? Don't tell me you're angry?"

"I-I'm not angry! I'm neither feeling pissed off nor comparing myself with Cow Tits, and definitely not feeling jealous of her!"

"No, you definitely seem angry right now."

"You're being noisy so shut up. I'll curse you!"

While Fear and Haruaki was having their conversation, the grating sounds of the rotating spit suddenly stopped. Konoha could be seen lifting the whole pig roast up high, inspecting how done it was roasted. Perhaps because the grade was a pass, Konoha smiled in satisfaction while holding the whole pig roast's skewer in one hand (probably a weight beyond an ordinary human's ability to lift) stabbing its front end into the ground next to the fire.

"Very well, very well, the roasting is done... Haryuaki-kun, come over here..."

Seeing her wave to him, Haruaki went up obediently. Appearances aside, the pig roast did look quite delicious with its drool-inducing aroma and the meat's dripping juices.

"Oh Kono-san, I haven't brought out the knife and plate. Please wait for me."

"Fufu, thou mayst prepare utensils but I can wait no longer. Allow me to test the taste~..."

Konoha knelt down. With a flash of her right hand's karate chop, a portion of meat was sliced almost like magic, falling on top of her fingertips. Tossing the meat into her mouth and chewing, Konoha went "Mmm!" and nodded with satisfaction.

"As expected of meat roasted by my hand, truly delectable! Good work, Kuroe-shan too... Before thou goest to bring plates, take this reward first~"

Konoha swiftly sliced another piece of meat using a barehanded chop, delivering it into Kuroe's mouth. "Muohoh, it's really too yummy~" Kuroe mumbled with her mouth full while enterin the house to bring plates.

"Thou art next, Haryuaki-kun~ Ufufu, open thy mouth~"

"..."

"Thou refusest... Verily?"

"Th-Thanks for the food!"

Instantly feeling a breeze against his face that seemed to be coming from the frozen hell of Cocytus, Haruaki decided to open his mouth obediently. Konoha's fingertips touched his lips as they delivered piping-hot pork into his mouth. In fact, the meat really was very delicious.

"Huff huff... Too amazing, it's really very tasty."

"I know right~? Well then, what about the little lass...?"

Even at a time like this, Fear still bared her fangs and howled, very much in her usual style:

"I-I don't want it! At least, I definitely won't let you feed me!"

"Yes, then forget it. Even though 'tis so delectable~"

Completely unfazed, Konoha used her hand to cut and eat another slice of pork. Her laid back expression was probably angering Fear.

"Hmph! No matter how tasty, I don't wanna grow useless meat as a result! Look at those fat tits that are like mountains of illegally abandoned tires! Also that fat belly with nothing but ugly ripples on them, like polluted rivers! Also those flabby arms and legs that are like weird creatures growing from dumped chemicals!"

"Why are you talking like it's some kind of segment from the variety show 'Hunting Down Illegal Industries!'...?"

"Damn you, shameless brat, shut up! It's a very apt metaphor, these descriptions are as profound as those unforgivable crimes! Anyway, these crimes all come from her unsightly gluttony...! Hmph, that meat's aroma and juices are clearly traps akin to those of insect-eating plants!"

What are you talking about—!? The usual Konoha would have lost her temper and retorted harshly, but she was currently not her normal self. Still confident and composed, she sliced another piece of pork.

"Kuku. Better too big than too small...? Precisely because thou eatest meat not, little lass, thou art currently... in such misery."

"M—MI.SE.RY...!"

Fear's expression froze instantly. Casting a glance at her, Konoha said:

"Ufufu, Haryuaki-kun also prefers... bigger, yes...? Here, a large piece of meat, thou needst not hold back, together we shall... Do this~"

"D-Do it like this?"

"Mmph, allow me to feed you again... Two people eating together...? Say ah~~"

Konoha was biting on one end of the large piece of meat she had just sliced off, but she did not continue to chew. Instead, she approached Haruaki directly like this—

"H-Hey, Konoha, don't tell me you're asking me to...?"

"Mmm-hmm~♪"

She wanted him to bite the free end of the meat? Then eat it? That was the situation here!?

For some reason, Konoha had closed her eyes. No matter what Haruaki said or did, she probably could not be stopped. That was what Haruaki felt.

But someone, apart from Haruaki...

Still possessed the means to stop her.

In the next instant, Haruaki heard a splash of water.

Opening his eyes which he had involuntarily closed, Haruaki found Konoha completely drenched, still holding the piece of pork in her mouth.

The water had come from the bucket that Kuroe had prepared to extinguish the fire. Casually tossing away the now-empty bucket that only contained droplets of water, Fear said with an expression that could not be more serious:

"Oops, my hand slipped."

"F-Fear..."

"But I must say it was perfect timing. Cooling her head might make her sober. I might as well keep throwing water to replace that Operation Substitution Beauties. Just think of it as the second plan. No wait, it's probably faster if I just grab her by the neck directly and hold her head down in the bucket, right?"

"Fu... Fufufu... Little lass, how amusing thy behavior..."

Simply getting splashed by the bucket of water did not sober up Konoha, apparently. Sucking the piece of meat she was biting into her mouth like a beast, she then chewed. Her expression could not be read due to wet hair clinging to her face. Although her voice was laughing, the one thing Haruaki was absolutely sure was that she definitely did not find things funny.

"Uwah~ Oh no, I just went away for a moment only to find that things have gone totally awry...! It's hopeless now, Haru, hurry over here."

Bringing back plates, chopsticks and other utensils from the kitchen, Kuroe exclaimed in great alarm, standing frozen in one spot after witnessing the scene. Then she pulled Haruaki's arm to lead him away from the danger zone.

"What happened? Ficchi had been enduring all this time, right?"

"Yeah... Anyway, a lot happened."

Konoha lifted the bottle up high and poured brandy into her mouth again. Haruaki felt as though he could hear the gulp from her swallowing.

Then she slowly leaned forward—

"Truly what a shame that I am not wearing an ornamental hairpin! I shall have to punish thee appropriately!"

"Took the words right out of my mouth! Mechanism No.19 gouging type, spiral form: «Human-Perforator»!"

Readying her karate chop, Konoha sprinted towards Fear who was charging at the same time with the torture instrument transformed from the Rubik's cube, thus starting a violent clash. The sounds of impact between a drill and a Japanese sword could be heard. The two girls shifted positions rapidly, attacking from all sorts of angles, displacing air while dodging, throwing insults at each other, charging in for the attack once more—

This situation alone was enough to make one want to clutch their head and cry, but Konoha's current appearance was making things even worse. While dressed in just a kimono and dripping wet all over, she was like a beast, running, jumping, turning and performing flying kicks.

Holding one hand against his face, Haruaki sighed forcefully then shaking his head repeatedly, he looked back.

"Sorry Kuroe. Looks like even I can't stop them this time..."

"It goes without saying that I can't stop them either. Even if I extended my hair, I think it'll just get severed immediately."

The sounds of combat continued nonstop, clanging, crashing. There was no end to the shouting of insults. "Insolent lass, give thyself up obediently!" "You're the one who should be putting your boobs away, they've been falling out a while already!" "Excuse me, I am too big." "This is pissing me off——"

Haruaki and Kuroe could only wait for the storm to pass. They had no other choice.

Later—

There was no such thing as endless rain or a violent storm that lasted forever.

After some time, Haruaki heard a different sound compared to before.

"...Atchoo!"

Turning his head slowly, Haruaki looked back at the battlefield that he had avoided for a while now. The two girls had stopped moving.

Frowning, Fear was glaring at Konoha nonstop. On the other hand, Konoha was tossing her hair lightly, looking up blankly into space—Then another "atchoo." Presumably due to the high speed combat, her originally drenched body was almost dried completely, but the evaporation of water had lowered her body temperature.

"Haru, look quick...!"

"Ohoh!"

Konoha tried to take a sip of brandy, probably to help warm herself. However, she immediately moved the bottle away and tilted her head in puzzlement. After shaking the bottle lightly to confirm the weight of its contents, she pouted in displeasure.

Haruaki watched the scene in disbelief.

"Th-The bottle's finished...!?"

"Thanks to Ficchi's water-splashing operation number two, Kono-san's mind and body should have cooled off a lot. In other words, using two methods at once, perhaps Operation Substitution Beauties can skip over the middle phases directly, instantly reaching phase four, sobering now that the supply is cut!"

Haruaki felt as though a great mist had suddenly lifted before his eyes, causing his tense cheeks to relax on their own and a warm feeling to spontaneously manifest in his heart. Hope, anticipation, joy, gratitude, happiness—If he had to label this warm feeling, surely it must be one of those words.

"No, to be honest, I don't really care about the process anymore. As long as the result is good!"

"Agreed. Our long battle has is finally reaching a conclusion. What an arduous path!"

While savoring the wonderful ending with his entire body, Haruaki looked into Kuroe's eyes. She was smiling radiantly with relief and liberation written all over her face. He would not be surprised if tears started streaming down from her eyes. Because most likely he was making the same expression.

However, just at this moment...

Haruaki stared wide-eyed, blinking many times repeatedly. This was because some distance behind the smiling Kuroe, he saw someone who was not supposed to be present. Why had she appeared at a time like this?

"C-Class Rep...?"

"Huff... Huff... Yachi, what happened?"

The class representative of Haruaki's homeroom—Ueno Kirika—was panting heavily, her shoulders heaving up and down, her long ponytail shaking up and down as well, looking like she had rushed all the way here nonstop.

"W-What happened...?"

A foreboding sense rose up in Haruaki's heart as he repeated the question. Kirika frowned while raising the plastic bag in her hand slightly and said:

"Konoha-kun called me just now, saying: 'Buy alcoholic beverages, any sort will do. As quickly as possible.' Because Konoha-kun's voice sounded different from usual, I was thinking that there was definitely some kind of trouble related to cursed tools, which was why I needed to buy alcohol to suppress a curse or something like that—"

Crack, it was as though Haruaki heard the world fracturing. Naturally, what seeped out from the cracks was the black liquid known as despair. Haruaki remembered that Konoha had been on the phone not too long ago while she was roasting the pig. So the Kirika was the person on the other end.

"Oh... Just when the brandy had run out. As expected of myself, such foresight... Well then, Kirika-shan, come join us in our merrymaking... Mufufu, let us continue drinking in the living room..."

"K-Konoha-kun...?"

Konoha walked up and took the plastic bag from Kirika's hand. Understanding what had happened, Kirika instantly showed alarm on her face but before she could escape, Konoha had already wrapped her arm around Kirika's shoulder. Giving her no chance to resist, Konoha forced her to walk into the living room together.

"Everything's over..."

Hands on the floor, Kuroe hung her head forcefully. Haruaki wanted to do the same as well but a certain scene flashed in the depths of his mind. Buy alcoholic beverages, any sort will do. Alcohol. Alcohol apart from plum brandy.

"Hey, ye should come over too. Do not forget to bring the meat!"

Konoha turned her head lightly and casually spoke to Fear whom she had been fighting until just now. A classic show of the drunken Konoha's talents in capricious moods.

"Hey shameless brat, what do we do now? The plum brandy finally ran out! But now there's more alcohol!"

"Hmm... No, anyway, just do as Konoha says first, Fear. I think... I think I'm remembering something... What is it?"

Haruaki first extinguished the fire in the garden then brought the whole pig roast back to the living room. Along the way, he entered the kitchen to prepare large plates and other utensils to put on the living room table for everyone to use.

With a happy face, Konoha took out the alcoholic beverages from the plastic bag Kirika had brought.

"Ohoh, pure rice wine, beer, distilled spirits, isn't this sweet potato spirit...? Lovely. Oh, this must be western liquor... I remember drinking them rarely. Well then, how doth it taste—?"

What Konoha plopped onto the table was a bottle of whiskey.

This prompted a shock through Haruaki's entire body as though an electric current was flowing while his brain circuits suddenly connected.

"A-Ahhhhhhh!"

He remembered. He remembered!

"K-Konoha... Drink it, drink that right now, anyway, drink that first! Whiskey must be super tasty, you know? As expected of Class Rep!"

"Muu? Haryuaki-kun, why art thou suddenly... But I would like to drink this sweet potato spirit first—"

"No, drink this first! A big gulp!"

In the corner of his eye, Haruaki could see Fear and Kuroe exchanging glances as though they suddenly understood something. Swiftly, they leaned in behind Haruaki and said:

"Shameless brat, what's going on here?"

"If she drinks whiskey... What happens?"

Haruaki whispered:

"I remember now. In her current state, Konoha has no tolerance for western liquor, to the point that she'll fall asleep after drinking a single glass...! That's also how we were saved last time, except last time, Old Pops was the one who was ordered to go buy alcohol."

"Ohoh~ I'd really like to say 'why didn't you say that earlier' but I'll save the complaining for later. Since it's confirmed what needs to be done, let's not wait any further... Hey Cow Tits! I too, suggest that you drink this bottle of whiskey now! I command you!"

"Uwah, Ficchi~ That's way too obvious—!"

Just as Kuroe feared, Konoha instantly frowned.

"How now? After hearing the little lass, incredibly, I feel a sense of opposition rising in my heart... Distilled spirits, I shall drink distilled spirits first~"

"Th-This bitch... Okay, I get it now. Since a single glass is all that's needed, using a bit of force should be fine! I'm going to force it down her throat! Haruaki, Kuroe, Kirika! Hurry and hold down Cow Tits!"

"L-Looks like it's boiled down to force... Here I go!"

"Don't worry, I think Haru is the only one that Kono-san will never harm! ...But I can't guarantee the same for me. Feeling worried and scared, I'm using this, Mode: «Chaotic Tadamori»!"

"I'm totally lost here, but it looks like I should be bearing part of the responsibility. I guess I must help!"

"What are ye trying to do~!? I only want... to drink to my heart's content. Those who dare obstruct me, prepare yeselves accordingly—!"

The living room was instantly plunged into chaos. Crash thud! Black, rope-like objects were flying back and forth. Restraining tools of torture were deflected by karate chops. A certain massive object wobbled softly as it pressed down on Haruaki's face, followed by a seductive moan of "mmm haa..." For some reason, someone punched Haruaki in the back of his head. Who the heck!?

The pig roast was flipped over. Liquor packaged in aluminum foil on the table went flying, spilling out, wetting Haruaki's head, instantly filling the air with the smell of alcohol. Probably due to the splashing liquor entering Fear's mouth, she went "What is... going on? My body feels so hot... Rice crackers... flying in the air...?" She began to sway unsteadily.

Haruaki felt dizzy, unsure if it was due to the alcoholic vapors or over exhaustion. The commotion still continued. Not ended yet? Haruaki had no idea what was happening. Neither did he know if they were gaining the upper hand or not. His mind began to feel dazed. Even keeping his eyes open was getting difficult.

While his consciousness was gradually growing hazy, Haruaki could only hear—

"Nuwahahaha~ Again again... Bring it on, everything you've got~..."

She really sounded very happy... Unbelievably, Haruaki concluded with a smile.

Hence, this became his final memory of the night.

Part 6

Late night—The living room was shrouded in silence and darkness.

In this space that seemed as though time had stopped, movements suddenly appeared.

A figure got up abruptly, eyes still mostly shut. The figure yawned and took steps slowly. This action caused the figure's kimono to get caught on something. Because the sash was already untied, the kimono slid and fell off as a result, but the figure was not aware, still one foot in the realm of dreams. Her voluptuous body was exposed completely to the air. Slowly, she left the living room and entered the washroom. After going to the toilet, she walked to her room. Her hazy eyes swept across the room as she tilted her head in puzzlement. Nevertheless, she still pulled her futon out gruffly from the cupboard. Without laying it out neatly, simply placing the futon on the floor, she slipped under the covers naked.

"Mmm~..."

Consequently, she happily drifted off to the realm of dreams again.

Naturally, she did not recall at all what had happened the first time she fell asleep.

This too, was a happy thing.

Morning.

As soon as she woke up, Konoha was completely baffled by her naked state under the covers. She did not remember undressing before going to bed... Even her memories of the previous day were very vague... Whatever, probably nothing important. Although she seldom mentioned it to others, she did remove her clothing occasionally during her sleep when she felt too hot. Reluctantly leaving behind the futon and blanket's soft sensations against her skin, she got up and casually picked out some clothes to wear before walking to the living room.

But the instant she stepped into the living room, Konoha's mouth gaped wide in surprise.

"W-What happened here...!?"

The living room was totally devastated. The cupboard's door had a small hole while the paper sliding door was heavily damaged. Bottled and aluminum foil-packaged liquids had spilled onto the floor, producing stains all over the tatami. More outrageous of all—for some reason—there was

an object on the table, resembling a pig roast. Furthermore, most of the pig had fallen off the large plate.

That was not the full extent of the problematic situation. Inside the chaotic living room, there were also the three figures of her three housemates. For some reason, Kirika was also present. Everyone looked like they were sleeping soundly in utter exhaustion. Fear was gripping her Rubik's cube tightly, frowning in apparent pain, even grinding her teeth. Perhaps because she had scratched her belly, one of her hands had lifted her hem above her navel. As though trying to escape from something terrifying in the outside world, Kirika was in fetal position, clutching her head like a child. On the other hand, Kuroe was sleeping with her mouth open as though her soul had left her body. Oddly enough, her hair was extended outwards in a number of bundles—as though she had fought a great battle against something. Immediately, Konoha spotted words depicted by several bundles of hair on the tatami but there were only two of them—"I surren." What on earth did this mean?

Finally—

Haruaki was currently soundly asleep. Strangely enough, the kimono that should be kept in her cupboard was draped over his head, as though he were sniffing it. Furthermore, ah yes—speaking of smell, Haruaki, Fear, Kuroe, Kirika and this living room itself—there was an intense smell of alcohol.

Hence, Konoha took a deep breath, raised her eyebrows and projected her voice.

"G-Get up now, all of you—!"

"Eeek! W-What what?"

"Huh? Legend has it that those who waste rice crackers during their life will be sent down to the rice cracker hell...? A-A dream huh. Forever sandwiched between two halves of a giant rice cracker, even this kind of torture brings chills down my spine too..."

"This is the Yachi residence—Oh right, yesterday..."

"Sorry, please forgive your humble servant! Please call me your loyal servant number one... Eh?"

The quartet sat up and shuddered at the same time as they looked at the intimidating Konoha who was standing in one spot.

"K-Konoha, no way—"

"Haruaki-kun, what do you mean by 'no way'? What on earth is going on here!?"

Pointing at the living room's tragic state, Konoha questioned them. However, the quartet's reacted rather oddly. Haruaki and Kirika breathed out in relief, Fear sighed in exhaustion whereas Kuroe clapped her hands together to express gratitude towards some unknown deity.

"Thank goodness, it's the usual Konoha..."

"This is not good at all! This smell of alcohol—as reluctant as I am to believe it, Haruaki-kun, all of you were drinking together, yes!? And this delicious-looking whole pig roast served to accompany the alcoholic beverages, didn't it!? I can't believe that while I was sleeping, you...!"

"No, umm..."

"No excuses. You all reek heavily of alcohol, that is the evidence! Also... Haruaki-kun, that kimono is mine, no well, it makes me happy if you really wish to sniff it, but, umm, provided that you ask, I can lend it to you no problem, myself included. You shouldn't steal it sneakily. Act more like a man, are you listening!? Back to the subject, according to the conventions of society, we are all minors and absolutely must not imbibe alcohol. Having made the same mistake during New Year's, we ought to have learnt our lesson and act with greater prudence...!"

Konoha lectured continuously, scolding without end. In the end, she thought to herself: as expected, this family relied on her to pull herself together. Lecturing when lecturing was necessary, this was a very crucial point.

"Understood!? Also, I—"

While she was about to continue, she suddenly met gazes with Haruaki. He was currently kneeling formally in seiza, acting with initiative (such obedience made him especially adorable), looking up at her.

At the same time, he was smiling genially with a very gentle expression.

Konoha felt her cheeks grow hot all of a sudden. However, now was not the time for that.

"I-I am very angry. Please reflect carefully, Haruaki-kun. Why are you still smiling?"

Haruaki scratched his head, a gentle smile still on his face.

"Uh... Because I was thinking that sure enough, this kind of Konoha is when you're acting the most like yourself. It makes me feel relieved and a bit happy."

Kuroe and Kirika were also exchanging glances, showing faint, wry smiles as though great burdens had been lifted off their shoulders. On the other hand, Fear had turned her gaze away, sulking, which was quite commonplace actually.

"This kind of Konoha'...?"

"No no, it's nothing. By the way, do you feel like your mood or body is more relaxed today?"

"Eh? Let me see... Now that you mention it, I do feel a refreshing breath in my chest. Oh, but the issue of a drinking party is neither here nor there!"

"That's good. Very well, continue with your lecture! We will all reflect fully. But after it's over, let me warm up the pig roast for everyone to eat together... Then I hope you'll consider this incident over, yeah!"

How baffling. Why was he suddenly acting with such manly graces?

However—

Currently, his face carried not only kindness but the determination to accept certain things.

In other words, he was like a warrior who lived proudly with his head up high.

Simply seeing him like this, Konoha confirmed once again, how fortunate she was to have him as her owner, what happiness to be able to become his possession—These perfectly natural feelings. Her heart began to pound intensely.

Hence, there was only one thing left for her to do.

"S-Since you are reflecting, very well. No helping it, there seems to be some kind of hidden story but I shall not pursue the details. Fine, hurry and clean up. Let's have breakfast. Of course, we must make the most of poor mister pig's meat!"

Smiling as usual, Konoha mustered her acting skills to reluctantly forgive him—

As usual, she concealed the loud pulsations of happiness in her heart from him.

Naturally, at the same time, she wished from the bottom of her heart for the eventual arrival of the day when she no longer had to conceal such feelings.

C u b e × C u r s e d × C u r i o u s



びゅーてい・あんど・ざ・びーすと?
～桜参白穂、狂奔する～



C u b e × C u r s e d × C u r i o u s

Chapter 3 - Beauty and the Beast? ~Sakuramairi Shiraho on a Rampage~

Part 1

—Hence, Fear visited that place once again.

"I've... finally... returned..."

While her eyes were staring solemnly straight ahead, her shiny silver hair was fluttering in the wind. As though trying to confirm various complex thoughts and emotions in her mind, she murmured softly:

"I've filled with regret every time I recall the scene back then. Why didn't I move my hands more? Why didn't I move my feet more? Why didn't I open my eyes more? Why didn't I do more—Ahhh, ultimately, I didn't get to do what I was supposed to do. Everything was incomplete, nowhere near enough. That's why—"

Fear was eagerly waiting with impatience for the instant when these desires exploded. Overflowing from her heart, these desires turned into countless breaths, swirling in her surroundings.

Nervousness and tension.

Unease and anticipation.

While monologuing, she slowly took a step forward. The breaths hanging in the air were conferred the mission of breaking through the impasse.

"That's why I have to start all over again. I have to let everyone know that I'm no longer my past self. Even if it means crushing my feet, I won't halt my steps; even if it means tearing off my arms, I won't regret. I will carve everything into my memory, branding all sights into the back of my eyes. All this is for overcoming my foolish regrets!"

Then forward.

In the beginning, she simply walked slowly, then gradually she accelerated, soon reaching her fastest speed. Simply advancing nonstop, forward, forward!

Charge, charge, charge—

Watching Fear from behind, Haruaki narrowed his eyes and yelled to her. But surely, she could no longer hear him.

"Hey Fear, I'll first say this just in case. Your excitement is directed in the wrong direction. None of us can keep up with your pace."

Fear's gaze was locked onto the place she was currently about to rush into.

The words on the sign were no different from what they saw on their last visit.

Namely, the Woof Meow Friendship Park—

The name of the addictive paradise that made Fear rationality.

One ordinary Sunday morning, a dramatic change was brought about by Fear's sudden whim. Indeed, before that, the day was definitely as calm and peaceful as usual.

Haruaki was about to finish washing the breakfast utensils. While helping out, Konoha was preparing tea. Going off to work at her beauty parlor, Kuroe had opened the front door noisily and announced: "I'm off~..." On the other hand, Fear was lying on the tatami in boredom, watching television while saying: "Hmm~ What should I do today...? So bored."

However, a furry puppy television commercial started it all. As though suddenly recalling something, Fear stood up at once and yelled:

"Oh right! It's called the Woof Meow Friendship Park! Let's go there again! 'Cuz if you ask me whether I had enough fun there last time, I definitely can't answer affirmatively, besides, today is so free and the puppies and kittens are so furry and fluffy! Yes, let's do it! It's decided!"

In that instant, Haruaki almost dropped the plate he was washing, Konoha sighed deeply while Kuroe suddenly closed the front door that she had opened halfway, making a hundred-eighty-degree turn and declaring: "I'm off~ ...Not!"

"S-So sudden!"

"Getting ready to go out now would be somewhat troublesome. Why not relax and spend today casually at home?"

"What what? We're going out to have fun?"

"Guh, I can't believe you came back as her ally. If only you left for work a second sooner!"

"Oh dear~ Although I will always stand on Ficchi's side, somehow I'm really getting the feeling recently that I'm slacking off a bit too much. As a result, I'm just coming back to listen to the situation. I'll take a neutral stance this time. If you're going, I'll come along. If you're not going, I won't go either. Thanks for having me!"

"You're just feeling lonely if we leave you out, right?"

"That works too."

Confronted with the sudden suggestion, Haruaki and Konoha showed hesitancy on their faces while Kuroe remained neutral. However, Fear's determination was firm and she had already ran back to her room to begin rummaging seriously and prepare for an outing.

"You guys may say no, but it's really too boring. Since I know the location anyway, I must go even if I have to go alone!"

She showed no signs of giving up at all. However, it was definitely too worrying to let Fear wander far away on her own, to play outside unattended. Hence, Haruaki's group had no choice but to compromise in the end.

After getting ready to head out, they then took a bumpy bus ride for dozens of minutes. As soon as they arrived at the destination, Fear sprinted ahead, resulting in the current situation.

"Hmm... She really can't hear me."

Even though Haruaki had tried to remind Fear that her excitement was misdirected, naturally, none of it reached her ears. Looking at the back of the silver-haired figure as she ran into the entrance, Haruaki sighed.

"What starting all over again? ...She was clearly having a ton of fun last time, right?"

"It is true that she was having fun, but that child probably doesn't think so herself, sigh~"

"Because last time's situation required us to pay attention to clocks all the time. Although Ficchi looked like she was having fun to the max, I don't think that was actually the case."

"What are you guys doing!? Hurry and come in, hurry!"

Fear had already passed through the gate and was waving vigorously at them. She had apparently paid the entrance fee herself. Since the ticket was not expensive, she probably used money she had saved up from all her part-time jobs so far... Seeing her growth, Haruaki spontaneously felt happy for her but also experienced a sense of loneliness.

"Ehehe, O~nii~chan~♪ Ticket please!"

"Stop suddenly acting cute and saying nonsense. Working members of society should pay for themselves."

"Muu~ I was just thinking I should have you spoil me on Ficchi's behalf, Haru. Although I'm in the workforce, the economy has been bad recently. It's a huge problem for me too."

"In that case, that's even more reason for you to open shop and go to work, right? I can't believe you gave up on earnings completely on a valuable Sunday."

"Ah~ ah~ I can't hear anything~"

Haruaki bought his ticket while looking at the poster put up at the counter. Indeed, they were in quite a flustered state the last time they visited and could not spare any thoughts on leisurely browsing the park's maps, events and other promotional posters.

This Woof Meow Friendship Park was an integrated facility combining a zoo with an athletic park where visitors could bring pets in to play. Despite being a zoo, attractions were ultimately limited to the level of dogs and cats without offering large exotic animals like elephants or pandas. The promotional posters listed out various events such as "Come hug bunnies!" or "Pony Test-Riding Experience." Today's event turned out to be: "Monthly Tradition: Woof Meow Friendship Park's Couples Battle! The winning couple will be presented with an extravagant prize!" For some reason, wedding photos of random couples were put up next to the poster. What did it mean?

After waiting for Konoha and Kuroe to buy their tickets, Haruaki entered the gate as a trio. As soon as Fear saw the dog exercise plaza stretching before her eyes, she began to grow restless.

"Wow, wow... This place is really awesome! Furry little doggies over there, wait for me...!"

Probably reaching the limits of self-control, Fear took a step forward unsteadily. Haruaki hastily grabbed her by the collar.

"Shouldn't you plan a little first? You came here to have as much fun as you can, right...? I've brought the map so have a look first and decide which places you want to visit. There's still plenty of time."

Saying that, Haruaki glanced at the large clock standing in the plaza. The clock hands were concretely tracing out the passage of time—Haruaki could not help but feel guilty slightly, although back then, they had no choice.

"Muumuu. You have a point. After all, I can visit this park any time and I'll surely see doggies everywhere. So let's have a look at other attractions... Oh, here's the cat petting house I visited last time, it's a wonderful place. I have to go again. Also—this rabbit garden looks nice too. After all, as one of the twelve animals of the oriental zodiac, the rabbit mustn't be missed out. Do they allow petting? It'd be nice I could pet them. Rabbit fur probably feels different from dogs and cats. I never knew there were so many places to visit, like the pony farm or the aviary. Oh man, where should I start—Uhahahahahaha!"

"Crap, she can't stop laughing from over excitement. Ficchi, you've got to calm down!"

"She can't possibly calm down, right?"

"Indeed, it is impossible."

Haruaki and Konoha sighed deeply. Instantly, Fear snatched the map from Haruaki's hands and broke into a sprint.

"Okay, let's start over here! Hurry up or else I'll leave you guys behind! Don't get lost!"

"That's totally our advice to you!"

"I'm actually relieved that everything is happening too predictably. Fear, we're coming too, so wait up, stop running—!"

After that, Haruaki casually accompanied Fear to tour the park. He did not actually dislike animals and was only startled earlier when Fear suddenly suggested going out. Once arriving here, he decided that it was not a bad idea to spend a boring Sunday in this leisurely manner.

"Wow~ They're getting very used to this and don't struggle at all... But this kind of temperament is probably why they were placed here in the first place."

"In other words, cats for greeting visitors? Ufufu, this little one is a little chubby and reminds me of the manager... Mister manager, thank you for working so hard~"

What a peaceful time. Currently, the group was at the cat petting house that had Fear salivating completely. In terms of appearance, it resembled a small community center or daycare facility, equipped with playgrounds and cradles with blankets inside. Naturally, as the main attractions, the cats were also doing their own things as they pleased. Visitors were allowed to freely pet these cats inside this space.

Picking up a calico cat that was not afraid of strangers, Haruaki took a brief look all around. Konoha was using a foxtail toy that was kept here to play with a chubby cat. Fear was having a staring contest at eye-level with a cat with large round eyes. She did not pick the cat up. Instead, she had her chin pressed against the floor, her bottom sticking up, a rather unseemly posture. Not only her posture but of course, her hazy eyes and the drool about to drip out from the corner of her lips were unseemly to the extreme.

"Ehe... Really too cute... Fufuhe~"

Then Fear wriggled and lifted her chin, supporting herself with elbows against the floor. Her level of unseemliness sort of dropped a notch.

"O-Okay, that's about it for visual appreciation. I'm just warming up in consideration for the burden to my heart. If this were enough to satisfy me, my priorities would be totally wrong. Next, finally, it's time to... pet...!"

Still with her elbows against the floor, Fear slowly extended her fingertips towards the cat. The cat cocked its head and stared blankly at Fear. However, just as Fear was about to touch the cat, it started approaching Fear instead, taking tiny steps.

Fear was still in the same posture with her bottom up, elbows against the floor. Naturally, her collar was hanging low as result of gravity. Combined

with the fact that Fear was modest in bust size, a vast cave naturally opened up beneath her collar. Cats were a type of creature that loved squeezing into narrow spaces, in other words—

The cat jumped into Fear's bosom all at once.

"Howawa! Wait... You ran there... Huahhhhhhh, but it's furry, it feels so furry in front of my chest! Hold on, if you move carelessly, you'll touch weird places,ahaha so ticklish... Mmm! Hey..."

Laughing one moment, going red in the face sometimes, making strange moans on occasion, Fear was making a ton of noise. The front of Fear's clothing shook as the cat moved about. Fear reached inside her collar, desperately trying to rescue the cat. Her collarbone flashed in and out of view while the dark expanse of unguarded space stretched beneath. Don't pull too hard or else your collar be stretched out of shape—Haruaki thought with escapism while quietly turning his gaze away as usual.

But just as he turned away, he saw Kuroe. She was staring at him intently with a bit of a sad look in her eyes.

"Ficchi ended up stealing naturally... what I was planning to do deliberately. This makes me feel... a little... jealous."

"W-What are you talking about?"

"Hmm. Hey, Haru, look..."

Kneeling on the floor with her calves against the outside of her thighs, Kuroe grabbed her skirt with her tiny hands. Then slowly, she lifted the hem, revealing her calves, then her knees, then her thighs—

"Hold on... What are you doing?"

"Don't ask so many questions. Just watch. I can't bear it any longer... So ticklish and so hot. So, have a look..."

"Wah—!"

Just as Haruaki was about to turn his gaze away again, out from between Kuroe's legs—in other words, beneath her skirt—a black cat poked its head out. Having lost the dark place where it had been resting quietly, the black cat made a discontented expression, got up on its little legs and walked away in search of new shelter.

"..."

"Bye bye~ Hmm... You have no idea how much effort it took me to drive that cat into this place! Not only do I need to consider the most comfortable size of the space but also calculate how far apart my legs should be... Even I can't help but feel jealous of Ficchi! That's why I gave up on the 'using suggestive language to make Haru misunderstand and get flustered' operation. Since it's lost its novelty, there's no point in delaying the delivery. Onwards to execute the next plan!"

"You don't have to execute anything! Jeez, I can't believe you're doing this kind of stuff while I'm not paying attention!"

"But then again, after experiencing this furry feeling in a spot I've never tried before, I'm beginning to find it kind of nice... Huhya! Hmm... Hyah!? No, it's no good, seems like it's no good after all, hey—You should come out too! Ooph—!"

—In any case...

Haruaki concluded that the girls all seemed to be having quite a fun time in their own respective ways.

Part 3

After spending quite some time interacting with animals, Fear and company started to feel a bit hungry. Hence, they went for some simple food at an area lined with gift shops and restaurants. Although it was still too early for lunch, filling their stomachs was crucial because they still had not visited half the places they were supposed to go, due to going on many detours on whim.

Fear finished her after-dinner tea in one gulp.

"Hey Haruaki, you guys are going to take a break here for a while, right? Then during this time, can I go over to the gift shop to have a look?"

Haruaki was sitting before the restaurant table, sipping tea absentmindedly. Hearing Fear, he turned his head to face her. What a carefree guy he was. Come on, in order to try out all the facilities without leaving any regrets, even a single second must not be wasted.

"Sure... But don't buy things yet because it'll be troublesome to carry around."

"I know. I'm just gonna look."

Fear walked over to the gift shop near the restaurant. Inside, all sorts of goods were laid out. There were stickers, desk pads and key holders emblazoned with the logo of the Woof Meow Friendship Park. Other relatively unusual products included pet collars, leashes and dog clothing with the same logo. The targeted customers were probably the visitors who brought their own pets to the park. In addition, there were many other goods that did not seem very related to the park, but simply placed together due to relevance to cats and dogs, such as stationery, piggy banks, plush dolls...

"Muu, mumumu!?"

Fear suddenly stopped walking. Her gaze drawn to a certain location, her feet could no longer move. She crouched down on the spot, gazing intently at the massive object displayed behind a fence to prevent visitors from touching it.

One could categorize it as a plush doll. Also a cat. But no ordinary cat.

"I know... what this is. It's the park's most popular mascot, MeltyCat...!"

At all of the park's cat zones they had visited so far, virtually all the signs and buildings depicted this mascot. A lethargic in a lying down posture, drawn in an extreme version of super deformed style. Looking as though it was about to melt from heat, the cat's outline was a bit indistinct. Nevertheless, the distorted lines produced an unusual sense of adorability and comicality.

While staring at that thing, Fear slightly expanded her awareness into the surroundings. Apparently, the vicinity of this fence was the corner focusing on MeltyCat merchandise, including various things like key holders and cellphone straps. As though guarding the goods and also like the master of this corner, the massive MeltyCat plush doll, standing over a meter tall by visual estimates, was displayed prominently in the very center.

"Guh!? N-Now they've really got me—Is this a trap they set, knowing I'd be captivated by MeltyCat as soon as I laid my eyes on it!? I-I really want it...!"

Fear swallowed.

"Oooh... But, 'Not for sale, please do not touch' huh... Makes sense. As the master here, it won't be very dignified if anyone could buy MeltyCat. Even

if it's for sale, I'm guessing that the price is definitely beyond the money in my purse... So it's telling me to settle for buying other MeltyCat merchandise..."

But Fear was unable to tear her eyes off the plush doll. Staring intently at the adorable yet solemn fact, she then breathed out, long and deep. At the same time, she also heard a sigh from beside her.

"S-So cute. Unimaginably cute..."

"Yeah, it's really unimaginably cute..."

The other person was probably just murmuring to himself, but Fear could not help but concur because their sentiments matched completely. She also found the youth's voice a little familiar. But because her eyes were glued to MeltyCat, Fear did not turn to look at the voice's owner. All she could tell was that the other person next to her was crouching as well, staring in mesmerization at the same plush doll.

"Sigh... How could it be this cute...? I guess it's fully of mystery..."

"The greatest thing is how it looks so furry and soft. There this mysterious sense of balance in appearance... I really wanna try touching it. Who knows what it feels to the touch..."

"Definitely furry and fluffy. Ooh, just imagining it is making me feel unbearable!"

"If I could hold it in the palms of my hands... Who knows what I'm going to do to it."

"I really wanna put it on my head!"

"When sleeping, crawling under this soft plushie to use it as a blanket... Then of course, waking up in this state would mean having MeltyCat's face dominate your entire view! Ahhh, I'd die of happiness first thing in the morning! And thus, a space even harder to leave than the kotatsu is born!"

"Oh look! The mini-plushie is labeled 'Changes color when dipped into hot water!'"

"What!? W-What if that kind of high-tech function is also installed in the master... H-Holy cow!"

Fear turned her head in surprise, intending to check out what the youth was pointing to—As a result, she finally saw the face of the person whom she had been talking to all this time. Gazing into each other's eyes, they both exclaimed in surprise at the same time:

" "Eh?" "

No wonder Fear had found the voice a bit familiar. But only just a bit, so she could hardly be blamed for not noticing instantly. Because speaking of which, he usually appeared before Fear's circle as "her" instead.

"Sovereignty, sorry for keeping you waiting. There was a bit of a crowd at the washroom...!"

"Hey~ Fear, break time's over. It's time to get going—Oh, it's you guys!"

Hearing this, Fear looked back.

Considering Sovereignty was present next to her in male form, then most naturally—

Sovereignty's lover Shiraho must be standing behind. As soon as Shiraho spotted Haruaki's group, she backed away repeatedly in surprise and alarm.

Such a stomachache, and a convulsive one at that.

(Urgh...)

Fear and Sovereignty were currently side by side, crouching on the roadside inside the park, petting and playing repeatedly with a large dog, laughing happily. Standing behind the pair, Konoha was craning her neck, looking eagerly at the same dog. She looked like she really wanted to pet the dog as well, but she was having difficulty bringing it up because of her sense of pride in front of Fear.

Although this was clearly a heartwarming scene that should naturally bring a smile to one's face—

What Haruaki heard from beside him was irritated tongue clicking.

With trepidation, he glanced to the side—Her attitude had remained unchanged since a while ago. Arms crossed, a scowl on her face, she kept tapping her fingertips against her elbow.

"By the way, Kuroe-san sure is taking her time at the washroom."

"Yeah, she should be back soon—Woah!"

"I'm back—"

Fear and the others were taken aback with surprise when Kuroe happened to return at this time. Despite clearly wearing normal clothes before going to the washroom, for some reason, she had returned in what appeared to be a loose-fitting dog mascot costume.



"Wow~! Kuroe-chan, what's that? It's so cute—!"

"It seems to be pajamas~ I found a shop selling this kind of stuff when I was coming back from the washroom. Unable to resist the impulse, I bought it."

"If it's pajamas, can't you just wear it at home? There's no need to put it on immediately, right?"

"No no~ I have to put it on ASAP to publicize my cuteness! This is my mission as a mascot!"

"I've no idea what place's mascot you are, muu, but these pajamas are really quite nice. Apart from the MeltyCat merchandise, there's so much I wanna buy... What a dilemma!"

But, it's really so cute~ Sovereignty patted Kuroe on the head, dressed in the mascot costume pajamas. On the side, Shiraho's breathing quickened as the speed of her fingers tapping on her elbow gradually accelerated.

Thinking it would be a bad idea to stay silent, Haruaki gulped and spoke up:

"B-By the way, what a coincidence. Fancy coming to the same place on the same day to have fun—"

"We are not here for fun, human."

A terrifying voice. Shiraho simply turned her eyes sideways to look at him. That gaze resembled that of emotionless insects, almost enough to freeze people on the spot. Someone with a bad heart might probably get a heart attack immediately—

"We... Are... Here... On a date. Do you understand...?"

Haruaki could feel goosebumps rising on his back nonstop. She had deliberately fragmented her sentence, delivering her words slowly with a great sense of pressure, as though the grim reaper was riding upon her words, scythe in hand, hovering in approach.

"I-I get it...! Umm... How should I say this? This is really unfortunate, I feel very sorry for you two as well..."

"Oh really... You get it? Then I hope you can answer me, human. Because I haven't had a chance to go on a date with Sovereignty lately, I was

thinking we must go on a date on this day, beginning preparations from a very long time ago, making plans, resolving to spend time alone together, just the two of us. Indeed. JUST. THE. TWO. OF. US, spending a most happy day together, having as much fun as possible, allowing the body to replenish the kind of happiness element that resembles narcotics yet surpasses narcotics, in other words, the Sovereignty element, to an overflowing degree. Given my plans, what do you think is the proper method for me to deal with insensitive, cruel, irrelevant, meaningless and aimless interlopers getting in my way?"

One step, another step. Like a ghost, Shiraho exuded a cold aura that was antithetical to the concept of life, finally approaching Haruaki. With a sneer that resembled a smile but was definitely no smile, she approached him.

"E-Eeek..."

"Okay, hurry up and tell me, human. What level of punishment can you accept? By the way, my lower limit is somewhere in the area of abandoning corpses or destroying corpses."

"So you've taken murder for granted as a matter of fact!? No wait, calm down, I said that this was just an unfortunate coincidence, we have absolutely no intention of getting in your way—"

"Regardless of intention, the fact is you have already succeeded in obstructing us! Seriously, as expected of a low-level human who only possesses intellect on the level of maggots...! I really hope you can die immediately and reincarnate into maggots matching your intellect, then gathering upon your own corpse to help me eliminate the evidence of abandoning the corpse. In this sense, it would be quite a perverse form of masturbation, rather fitting of your style. Does it feel good? Does it feel good? Then by the logic that I am making you feel good, I definitely won't be accused of committing a crime, then I shall murder and destroy the abandoned corpse without worry, and after that—"

"Shi~ra~ho~!"

While slowly approaching Haruaki and exuding murderous intent from her entire being, Shiraho was saying things that were definitely bad enough to require calling the police. At this moment, Sovereignty hugged her shoulder from the side. Rather than stepping forward to rescue Haruaki, Sovereignty was simply talking to Shiraho while using the opportunity for intimate contact as usual.

"Kuroe-chan is back now, so let's continue to the next location?"

Shiraho's transformation was excessively fast and overly natural. Making a tender smile of happiness towards her lover, she murmured softly with gentleness and loving affection, almost enough to melt someone.

"Fair enough, let's be on our way. However—"

"Umm, Sovereignty..."

Haruaki could not help but interrupt. While Sovereignty turned to look at him, Shiraho hissed and glared viciously at him, giving off an aura like that of underworld deities. Uh, hold on, I'm speaking up because I'm trying to help!

"Haruaki-kun, what's up?"

"Uh... You're on a date with Shiraho today, right? It's just coincidence that we're here, so it's not good if we get in your way... So how about we move separately?"

"Yes, Sovereignty, let's do that! This is the suggestion the foolish human came up with by racking his brains of maggot intellect. He'll end up being so pathetic if you don't accept the suggestion!"

"Eh~ It's a rare chance so wouldn't it be nice to walk around together?"

However, Fear failed to read the mood and objected. Caught in the middle, Sovereignty hunched her neck slightly and said:

"Ah, yeah. Uh... What should we do? I'm actually fine either way..."

"If either way is fine, then let us follow our original plan. We'll tour the place on our own, just the two of us. Then next up is... This place, the aviary."

"The aviary? We're planning on going there next too. Since our destinations are the same, we can go together."

"—That was the original plan, but let us change our route, Sovereignty. In fact, I don't like birds very much. If I were to see an owl turning its head a 180 degrees, I might be tempted to forcibly twist it another revolution or two. So for the sake of the owls' lives, we shall skip the aviary."

"B-But I really like owls! Not only are they fluffy but cute as well... Say, Shiraho, you don't have to hate Fear-chan and the others so much."

Shiraho sighed deeply.

"It's not that I hate them but I do find them obstructive and don't want to encounter them. That's all."

"Since today's supposed to be a date with you, Shiraho, I was basically planning to go around the place with you alone... But changing our route just to avoid running into them, that's going a bit far... Just keep things the same as usual. If we run into them, then just say hi or chat for a bit, there's actually nothing wrong with that—"

"No. In any case, I don't want to. Okay, Sovereignty, let's go!"

"Wahhh, Shiraho, don't drag me—! Uh, so that's what's happening, I'm sorry! If we run into each other later, let's say hi again~!"

In this manner, Shiraho dragged Sovereignty and they disappeared into the distance. Seeing that, Fear cocked her head, utterly baffled and said: "Umuu... I really don't get why Shiraho is in such a bad mood... Did we do anything wrong?"

Of course, rooted to the spot, Haruaki and the others could only exchange glances, shrugging helplessly.

Then they resumed what they were doing before encountering Shiraho and Sovereignty, resuming a leisurely tour of the park—As much as Haruaki wanted to say that, however...

"Ohoh, they're bunnies! Bunnies! White ones! Red ones! Fluffy ones!"

"Eh!? Where, where's the red bunny? Is it like a Char-custom!?"

"No, I mean the eyes. Oh it's you, Sovereignty? We meet again—"

"Okay, let's go, next location. Also, Sovereignty, no touching bunnies today, apparently!"

As soon as the group reached the bunny square where Shiraho and Sovereignty were already present, Shiraho strode forward, pushing Sovereignty's back. Of course, at the same time, she was glaring at full power towards Haruaki's group like laser beams as though saying "Don't follow us, or else I'll kill you all!"

After spending lots of time appreciating the rabbits, Haruaki's group moved onto the next location. However, they ran into Shiraho and Sovereignty

again. Despite deliberately walking in the opposite direction, they ended up meeting again for some reason. The same thing happened the third time, then the fourth. Every time, Shiraho would click her tongue hard, forcibly interrupting Sovereignty's conversation with Fear and the others, and either pushing the back or pulling the arm of her lover, she would continue their journey of escaping, just the two of them.

"Is their luck that bad or what...? We really have no intention of stopping them from having time alone together."

"Hmm... They should simply give up and just tour the place with us. Sheesh, that damn Shiraho, I can't believe she's keeping Sovereignty all to herself... Oh, another encounter."

Noticing something, Fear stopped walking. Within the park were a number of athletic grounds for dogs to run around. Next to one of these grounds was an area resembling a resting zone, with rows of benches and a few mobile vendors. Sovereignty was there. But unlike all the times earlier, Shiraho could not be seen anywhere nearby.

"...?"

Haruaki suddenly felt a sense of dissonance. Of course, Shiraho's absence was one of the reasons, but Sovereignty's attitude also seemed a little different from before.

His eyes, staring blank towards the dogs running on the athletic grounds—
Seemed slightly lonely, slightly sad and slightly in pain.

Such were the complicated emotions residing within those eyes.

Part 4

"Hoo~" Shiraho sighed greatly. What a great failure. Today was originally supposed to be a perfect date instead.

"Excuse me... Dear customer, what would you like to order?"

Hearing the question, Shiraho looked up. Oh right. They had decided to take a break after walking for so long. Sovereignty was saving seats while she went to buy milkshakes at a stall.

Shiraho's mind could not think properly. More precisely, her thoughts were focused on one matter. Staring at the menu blankly, Shiraho pointed at the

"Super Popular Limited Offering" section and ordered two milkshakes randomly.

Due to the singleminded focus of her thoughts, then while waiting for the milkshakes to be made, Shiraho was still thinking of one thing, of course. Namely, her most beloved, most beloved, most beloved lover.

(Am I going a bit too far...?)

In a rare moment—she possessed this level of self-awareness, atleast—Shiraho was beginning to reflect.

A long-awaited date. No matter what, she wanted to spend a full day of happiness together, just the two of them.

Hence, after saying goodbye at one point, she had tried everything she could to stay away from that group of perverted maggots. Neither did she allow them to approach. She had made her mind and committed herself utterly. As soon as they spoke, she interrupted. As soon as gazes met, she blocked them. Then she led Sovereignty away from them.

But after thinking calmly—

(From that child's perspective... It only feels like someone is stopping him from talking to his friends. Perhaps, maybe—It's making him unhappy?)

But this absolutely did not imply that her own worth was lower than those girls. Shiraho was confident that she was the unmatched and irreplaceable lover in Sovereignty's eyes. This absolute position was absolutely unshakable. Furthermore, on a completely separate level, although resembling the difference between that between a lover and pets, those people were apparently quite important to Sovereignty as well.

Thinking back now, starting at some point, it seemed like Sovereignty had shown signs of exasperation and displeasure. No, ultimately, it just seemed so, that was all. It was Shiraho's imagination. But... What if it were not—?

(Slightly... Just slightly accepting the company of those people should be fine, I guess...)

However—If that really came to pass, Shiraho tried imagining the result.

For example, just when she was about to whisper sweet nothings coming straight from her heart, inane jokes would be heard in surroundings; just

when she was embracing Sovereignty, conferring a lover's warmth, someone would pounce at Sovereignty like a puppy or kitten; just when they were gazing into each other's eyes, conveying noble oaths in their gaze, someone would suddenly pop up between them to ask "Hmm? What are you two doing?"—

"U-Unforgivable...!"

"Eeek! I-I didn't take this long on purpose...!"

"Huh?"

"N-Nothing, sorry for making you wait—! I'll give you extra for free, so please don't complain to customer service!"

Why was the staff so afraid? All she had done was narrow her eyes viciously, drumming her fingers on the stall's counter, gnashing her teeth while murmuring unforgivable, nothing more.

In any case, since she was getting extra for free, Shiraho gladly accepted it. After paying and picking up the fully loaded cups, Shiraho turned around and walked over to where Sovereignty was waiting.

Not a far distance. Only after a couple steps and she could already see the back of Sovereignty's head while he was sitting on a bench.

However—Beside him on the same bench, there was a silver-colored head. The perverted man and the rest of the group were also sitting on the bench beside them.

(Again...!)

Biting her lip, Shiraho once again confirmed that her thinking was correct. Offering any slight pity to the enemy and it would bring about her own death. These people were rotten tangerines, Sivash spores, xenomorph eggs. In order to achieve a perfect date for just the two of them, she had no choice but to eliminate them from the root, without mercy, without hesitation, without discretion—

Making her mind up again, huffing and puffing, she approached the bench from behind with heavy footsteps.

Just at this moment—she heard Sovereignty's quiet voice.

She overheard accidentally.

"Somehow... It feels too constraining. Constraints, after all... are very painful..."

Shiraho stopped in surprise. Huh? What did he say just now?

Sovereignty had not noticed Shiraho's presence. Sitting on the bench, facing ahead, he then spoke words that made Shiraho's heart stop.

"...I guess there's no choice but to start over."

Sitting beside her, the silver head first glanced at the side of Sovereignty's face before asking:

"B-But, what will the owner say...?"

"I don't care! Yeah, it's the owner's fault after all!"

Sovereignty's tone grew forceful—

Declaring with such clarity.

(Ahhh, no way, impossible! No, no no! It's wrong!)

Shiraho felt as though her blood was evaporating from her brain, as though the skin of her back had been peeled all at once, as though her heart had stopped, turning into an ice-cold and heavy lump sitting in her chest cavity.

Ahhhh—This was terror.

Currently, all Shiraho could feel was terror.

"W-Wait, I...!"

Her throat kept panting. How to inhale oxygen? How to exhale carbon dioxide? How to speak? She had forgotten everything completely.

However, in an effort to prevent loss, she forced her frozen legs to move. Towards the bench, she ran and ran. But of course, even her legs had forgotten how to run as well—

"Kyah...?"

"Eh?"

She tripped right before she reached the bench. Sovereignty looked back. The two milkshakes in her hand flew into midair. "Watch out—!" Sovereignty instantly pushed Fear away from her side. As Shiraho

watched, everything seemed to happen in slow motion as the two milkshakes turned upside, perfectly tracing out a contemptible curve, spilling on top of Sovereignty's head—

Splash—!

"..."

"Ah... Ah..."

Speechless. His face was dyed a milky white. No wait, it was an accident, but Shiraho could not speak. Not because the air in her lungs were forced out after falling over. Neither was it because she could not think of what to say. The things she wanted to say were uncountably many.

However—Sovereignty did not say a word.

Looking down at Shiraho, there were faint glimmers of tears in the corners of his eyes.

This time, Shiraho's heart really did stop beating.

In the next second, Sovereignty suddenly turned around and broke into a run. "Woah, Sovey-chan—?" Kuroe chased after him but Shiraho could not find any strength in her legs to stand up.

Carved into her mind were Sovereignty's tears, gaze, silence and words.

He found her love too heavy a burden? He felt that they could not continue any further?

Lacking even the strength to support her upper torso with an arm, Shiraho smacked her forehead against the ground.

"H-Hey! Shiraho!?"

Someone ran to her with noisy footsteps, but she had neither the strength nor the energy to sit up.

She really wanted to die. Just kill her. She really wanted to die. Death would be better than anything.

His attitude. An attitude never seen before.

Definitely—He must hate her now.

Part 5

"Aha... Ahahaha..."

Shiraho was sitting on the bench, rendered a pile of pure white ash, staring blankly at the sky. It almost looked as though her body would gradually scatter in the blowing wind. Laughing idiotically in bizarre despair, the sight was painful to watch.

"Yeah, it's true that spilling the milkshakes on Sovereignty was a big mistake... But there's no need to be so shocked, right...? Sovereignty didn't lose her temper either."

Haruaki spoke in trepidation but Shiraho's eyes did not move, as though she were currently communing with fairies in the air.

Just as Haruaki sighed, his cellphone rang in his pocket to indicate receipt of a text message.

Konoha looked at Haruaki.

"Who is it?"

"Let's see... Oh, it's Kuroe. She said: 'I've caught up! Currently with Sovey-chan in search for a place to get changed. Don't worry. Just wait there for us!' That's it."

He could see Shiraho's hand tremble once.

"Y-You see, there's nothing there about Sovereignty being angry..."

"...He ran away on his own. And he's planning to get changed together with that young girl, not with me. You see, he doesn't need me. Sure enough, I... Ahhh..."

As soon as she finished murmuring emphatically, Shiraho clutched her head in worry and leaned back. Haruaki had no idea why she was taking this so hard... Could it be that apart from the spilt milkshakes, something else happened to cause a dispute between them? That said, Haruaki's group still had no idea at all.

"What a weird girl, making mountains out of mole hills~ Okay, since Sovereignty is with Kuroe, she should be back immediately with her clothes changed. During this time... Hmm, I'll first do what I'm supposed to do."

After glancing at Shiraho, Fear walked over to a dog visible in the athletic square before them. A Japanese Akita was standing together with an elderly owner. After saying something to the owner, Fear knelt down in front of the dog, making a rustling while trying to do something. But in the next instant, the Akita began to run across the square as fast as it could. "Hey, slow down—!" Fear chased closely after it.

"How peaceful over there..."

Fear was behaving the same as usual so there was no need to worry especially. Shiraho also had no attention to spare on something so trivial, still in a state akin to a pile of ash.

"Hey, it'll be okay. You don't need to worry so much."

"Listen to him. Also, consider this, if Sovereignty-san really were angry, so long as you apologize to him sincerely, you'll definitely be able to make up."

"Make... up..."

Shiraho suddenly stood up from the bench, murmuring in an empty voice while staring to walk unsteadily.

"Indeed... I must... make up. Absolutely. By any means necessary—"

"Hold on, they're currently finding a place to get changed and will be back when they're done."

"It must not wait... Like anyone could wait any further."

Shiraho sped up instead of stopping her footsteps, entering a jog then imperceptibly shifting into a full sprint.

"Sheesh, seriously! Uh... I'll go bring her back! Kuroe and Sovereignty should be back soon, so you should stay here with Fear!"

"I-I understand!"

Fear was still chasing the Akita dog all over the place, so Haruaki could not leave her alone in this place. After asking Konoha to stay, Haruaki chased after Shiraho.

Her long black hair fluttering, Shiraho continued to dash madly without aim. Just as Haruaki was about to run out of breath, she gradually reduced her speed... Then finally stopped.

"But, even if I find him and apologize... Is this enough for reconciliation...?"

Standing frozen in place, Shiraho whispered with forlornness.

"Huff... Huff... Don't worry. I'll help speak on your behalf too. Rather, I'll do everything I can if you need any help, so you should calm down first."

Haruaki made this suggestion after catching up to her, but Shiraho did not answer. He knew that what he said was very irresponsible, irrelevant and baseless, but he really believed that there was no need to be so pessimistic and negative about things.

However, just at this moment—

"Method of apology... Sincerity... To express sincerity... What might make that child happy...?"

Shiraho's murmurs suddenly stopped as her gaze settled on a certain spot.

Before their eyes was the heart of this Woof Meow Friendship Park, a stage that looked like some sort of event was about to start. The stage's surroundings was totally busy. Park staff was decorating the stage magnificently and setting up equipment.

Haruaki recalled the poster he had seen next to the counter when entering the park. Today's event.

A huge poster was put up on a board near the stage, showing more detailed information about the event. The spot Shiraho was staring at was precisely that poster.

Monthly Tradition: Woof Meow Friendship Park's Couples Battle. First prize is—

"The super large MeltyCat plush doll that's not for sale...?"

"It's what Sovereignty... was staring intently at..."

Looking only at the photos of the prizes, this seemed to be the case indeed. The plush doll that Fear and Sovereignty had been staring at in the gift shop.

A terrifying "fufu, fufufu" laugh was heard. Of course, the source was—

"Fu... Fu... I understand now. I know what I have to do. I guess I must make some sacrifices. Couples only? Well then, this cannot be helped

either. For the sake of getting back my precious one for sure, looks like I must fall to the depths of depravity this once. Very well. The way I am now, even if I must hold hands with an ugly and rotting corpse, stuck together, sitting on a Ferris wheel, I will show you...!"

"U-Umm, Shiraho, no way..."

A foreboding sense. However, Shiraho's face displayed not the slightest hesitation as she looked at him.

"—You just said you would do everything you can to help, didn't you?"

"Yeah, I said that but—!"

Shiraho grabbed Haruaki's hand. No, this was not an action that could be conveyed simply by the word "grabbed." His bones were almost crushed, his skin twisted, his flesh squeezed, this was a certain cruel action completely filled with offensive aggression.

Nevertheless, in the eyes of others, this was merely holding hands between a loving couple.

Pulling Haruaki's hand forcefully in this manner, Shiraho approached the stage, walking to the staff at the tent labeled "Registration." Smiling tenderly with the flawless perfection of her beautiful face, she said:

"Just as you can see—We are a couple. Please allow us to participate."

Konoha was watching the scene. Back at the bench area, Fear was also watching the same scene.

Inside various parts of the park were screens for live broadcasts. One of the screens was set up next to the benches. After turning on the power, staff informed park visitors through the screens to announce the start of the event and other information such as the MeltyCat prize—Furthermore, the camera also captured a portion of the situation at the venue.

"...Did you see that?"

"Yeah, I saw it."

Konoha and Fear exchanged glances sideways. They could not be mistaken.

"Why would Haruaki-kun and Shiraho-san...? Didn't they go to chase after Sovereignty-san? Speaking of which, he clearly said he was going to bring Shiraho-san back here."

"Yeah, the prize must be the main point. Their target must be that prize! How can I let them steal a march on me!?"

Konoha did not care about the prize at all, but the problem was that this event was limited to couples only. As soon as the thought of Haruaki and Shiraho entering together crossed her mind, her heart felt uncomfortable. Still, it was not like she could not understand why the two of them were entering the event... Assuredly, Shiraho must be intending to use the plush doll as a gift to reconcile with Sovereignty. But just like Haruaki, Konoha did not believe that Shiraho was "being hated by Sovereignty." There must be some sort of misunderstanding.

On an emotional level, Konoha wanted to stop them although rationally, there was no reason to do so.

Hmm~ Just as she pouted her lips in a dilemma, Konoha noticed a couple sitting on the next bench. She could not help but overhear their conversation.

"Oh, it's the Couples Battle."

"Is this event famous?"

"I was checking out this place on the internet beforehand and the website said it's a monthly event here. Also—there's supposed to be an urban legend."

"Legend...?"

The boyfriend cleared his throat and said:

"L-listen here... That event seems to bring good luck, allowing the winning couple to stay together forever! It's quite well-known on the net. Look, aren't there all those wedding photos on the event poster at the park entrance? I've heard that those were all couples who got first place in the past. So, umm—I-if you're up to it, we could try entering as well—"

"Oh crap! My part-time job's today! Sorry, I have to go now."

"Eh!? Hold up—!"

Konoha turned her head stiffly like a robot, meeting gazes with Fear who had likewise heard an uncertain rumor.

"That kind of legend... I-It's just coincidence. Happening purely by chance, it's just baseless superstition."

"But if it's true, then what...?"

The two girls narrowed their eyes more and more as they broke out in cold sweat.

"It's none of my business no matter who the shameless brat ends up with. But even though it's none of my business—"

"I-I was thinking, this might not be so good for Sovereignty-san, right? No, it's absolutely bad! There is no way to be certain, seeing as it is ultimately delusional and superstitious, nevertheless, things that could be prevented must be prevented! Therefore!"

"Yeah... No, oh right, I still have my mission of obtaining that MeltyCat plushie. Although I feel sorry for Shiraho and Sovereignty, I can't let them have it so easily. In other words!"

The two girls gulped and exchanged glances filled with determination.

Simultaneously, they declared:

" "Absolutely... They must be stopped...!" "

"Well then, that's about it for the registrations—"

"Hold on, waaaaaiiiit!"

Haruaki and Shiraho were lined up on stage as instructed, waiting for the event to start. Hearing the familiar voice, they both turned to look in surprise.

At the very last second, rushing to the registration counter at full speed—for some unknown reason, they turned out unbelievably to be Fear and Konoha.

"We are entering too!"

"Ah... Uh, I'm really sorry but this event is restricted to couples only..."

Fear and Konoha exchanged vicious gazes then hesitating for merely an instant, so briefly that one would not have noticed without paying close attention—

The two girls reached out at the same time, hugging each other by the shoulder, forming a tight embrace.

Next, Konoha's face turned so red that it was almost about to spew fire—

On the other hand, Fear spoke with a completely monotonous voice, no different from mechanical speech, totally emotionlessly—

"W-We are a lesbian couple, any objections!?"

"I-Indeed! We truly I-love each other, that's right!"

The two girls had yelled out words that caused not only the staff at the counter but the entire audience as well to go speechless.

Part 6

The "Woof Meow Friendship Park's Couples Battle" event was divided into two stages. The winner was decided based on the total score from the two stages. The first stage was the "Whiteboard Q&A" where couples had to answer the host's questions individually, scoring whenever their answers matched.

Haruaki and Shiraho were on standby next to the stage because it was almost their turn. Haruaki was naturally quite worried about the imminent whiteboard question and answer challenge, but to be honest, something else was worrying him even more. Of course, it was the lesbian couple who were glaring viciously in his direction with beast-like eyes while they were sitting on foldable chairs in the contestants' standby area in the back.

"W-Why did those two enter as well...?"

"Who knows? The silver-haired one looks like she wants the plush doll badly, so their target is probably the prize."

"Yeah... I can understand if it's Fear on her own but would Konoha accompany her for this reason...?"

In the standby area, there were other couples waiting for their turn on stage, but no one sat down in the foldable chairs in Konoha and Fear's

immediate vicinity. All the other people were glancing at them frequently with eyes filled with curiosity and doubt as though watching exotic animals.

Shiraho scoffed and said:

"No matter what, for the sake of reconciliation with Sovereignty, I absolutely need that thing. I won't let them steal it away...! Before worrying about them, you should think carefully about the upcoming challenge, human! It's almost our turn to enter stage!"

"Easy for you to say, but to be honest, I have no confidence at all."

"Of course I know that. The abilities you possess are only limited to insect-level intellect and criminal rationality. Even so, one must make do with the cards that are dealt. So long as you dedicate your full effort, perhaps there may be results. No, rather, you should put in so much effort that your life is put on the line. If you actually die on the spot while putting your life on the line, lasting until the very instant of snatching first place, there would be no better timing than that!"

"Hey, how much effort are you asking me to put in!?"

"So you fail to understand unless I spell it out for you? So-called insect-level intellect, conversely speaking, is essentially the ability to keep running forward even after decapitation. As for criminal rationality, that's the ability to mercilessly kill, violate and defile anyone who gets in the way. In other words... There exist missions in this world that can only be accomplished by low-level humans who have no futures."

Haruaki narrowed his eyes to protest silently but it did not work at all against the current Shiraho. Soon after, it was finally their turn for the whiteboard Q&A.

"Oh dear, I-I guess there's no choice but to go through with it...? Anyway, I'm starting to feel nervous. Oh right, shouldn't we come up with some kind of strategy?"

"Yes. I have been listening to the questions for a while now and they all seem to asking for answers that only couples would know."

"Then that's bad, right? Because we're not a couple at all."

"Stop stating the universally obvious. I will think of a way... So what remains for you to do is simply the aforementioned, human. Muster all the dedication at your disposal, put forth all the willpower you can apply with

desperate madness, and rack your brain at full speed. If we lose any part of our rightful score because of inane blunders, I will slaughter you."

At this moment, the staff waved to the two of them, hence Haruaki and Shiraho went up the stage using the stairs on the side. There were quite a lot of park visitors watching the event—but the vast majority seemed to be casting their gazes towards Shiraho with her otherworldly beauty. On the other hand, gazes directed towards Haruaki all seemed to be saying: "Why such an ordinary guy?" Haruaki not only felt nervous but also as though he were sitting on a pincushion.

Following directions, Haruaki and Shiraho sat down before a pair of desks that were placed side by side. Each desk was equipped with a whiteboard and marker combination. A movable partition between the desks could be manipulated to prevent the two contestants from seeing each other.

"Okay, it's time for the next couple to enter stage! Please encourage them with applause~!"

"Another pretty lady! Oh my~ This boyfriend here, you must be one lucky guy! What kind of trap did you lay down to capture her?"

"Hey, stop treating other people like exotic animals! I'm sorry~ This guy is always getting carried away and saying nonsense!"

The pair of hosts consisted of a man and a woman, staff dressed in the Woof Meow Friendship Park sweater. The man speaking in Kansai dialect played the fool's role, while the woman was in charge of retorts and punchlines... That seemed to be the setting.

After Haruaki responded with a stiff smile of courtesy, the hostess swiftly went through the rules, presumably realizing that the topic of conversation could not be continued. For the next part, questions were going to be asked about the two of them as a couple, scoring whenever their answers matched. In other words, this was a contest that tested how well they understood each other—

"Excuse me, may I say something?"

"Yes, the pretty girlfriend here—! Please go ahead!"

"We only started dating recently... More precisely, we are having our first date here today. If you would be so kind as to go slightly easy on us, it'd be lovely. But... I suppose... That's not possible, is it?"

Smiling naturally, Shiraho raised her hand, speaking with a demure aura. What perfect acting skills—Oh right, Shiraho used to be a promising actress lauded as a prodigy.

Most likely, her acting worked—

"Oh my~ ...It can't be helped! There's no helping it if such a pretty lady asks me for a favor! Well then, I promise you with my personal jurisdiction! I'm sorry, that's the way men are!"

The host lowered his head and bowed, resulting in wry laughter all around. Amidst the awkward laughs, there was booing that probably came from other contestants who had taken stage already. Fortunately, the booing was not really that malicious.

"This counts as thanks to the two of you for choosing our park as the venue for your first date! A little bit of favorable treatment! Then more specifically... Uh, we'll give some hints!"

"That's right~ I've no idea if the hints might be useful or not, but anyway, let's hope the two of you will have lots of fun before you leave! Will that be okay?"

"Yes, thank you very much. If possible, please offer hints that are easy to understand, ehehe."

Oh my god, to think that Shiraho is giggling ehehe! Haruaki stared in wide-eyed shock as though he had seen something astonishing. In the next instant, while maintaining her demure smile, Shiraho used the space under the desk to deliver a corkscrew blow to the flank of Haruaki's abdomen, unnoticed by everyone else.

"Ooph!"

"Oh my, this boyfriend just suddenly straightened his back with a weird grunt. Are you making a show of your determination? Or are you getting too excited from seeing your girlfriend's smile!? Well then, there comes the first question!"

The staff moved the partition between the desks, blocking Haruaki's view of Shiraho and vice versa. Then immediately, a "ding♪" was played, the kind of sound effect often heard on game shows.

"First question! 'What is the boyfriend's favorite food?' Okay, please answer~!"

Haruaki reflexively picked up his marker—Then stopped. To be asked this question suddenly, what a quandary. To be honest, he was the kind of person who always felt happy and went "How delicious~" no matter what he was eating. There was no particular food or ingredient that he would eat or cook especially frequently. But something must be written. Write something random? No, it must be something that Shiraho could guess. What would be relatively easier for Shiraho to guess?

"Okay, neither side has written anything yet~ If one person writes down an answer first, we'll be able to give a hint!"

"Hmm..."

Given no choice, Haruaki wrote down two words: "rice crackers." Shiraho might not know what he liked but surely she must know that Fear's favorite food at least. Given that they were living under the same roof, it would be natural to eat rice crackers together often—If only she could think that—

Haruaki held up his whiteboard and the hosts responded one after the other.

"Oh, the boyfriend has answered! Truly stylish! As for the hint, it's something with a very crunchy texture!"

"And it's basically brown in color!"

"Oh, wouldn't this be hinting too much... But then again, it's just the first question after all! Then I guess I should offer an extra hint as a special favor—This thing can fly! Woosh!"

"Yes, a bit of a stupid hint has appeared. But speaking of flying... It does fly indeed. Just as a matter of appearances! Oh, the girlfriend is beginning to write now! I knew it, the given hints are too easy!?"

Signaled by "time's up," the writing sounds from the other side of the partition also stopped.

"Then let's remove the partition for confirmation~! Okay okay, are these two's hearts linked as one!? Although they only started going out, as long as there's love, all obstacles can be overcome! Then let's reveal the answer here! So anyway, please read out your answers! Here we go, the reveal~..."

While the partition was being moved away, Haruaki turned his whiteboard lightly towards Shiraho then read out his answer. Likewise, Shiraho turned

her whiteboard towards him. For an instant, Haruaki saw a slightly troubled frown on her face. Then—

"Rice crackers!"

"Ci... Cicada...?"

Silence.

Speechlessness. Hush. Dead air.

After lasting a full duration of many seconds—

"Puha... W-What a shame, a wrong guess—!"

"Uhahaha! Is this girlfriend an airhead? Or is she acting the fool on purpose for comedy?"

The stage was instantly dominated by bursts of laughter. Shiraho went red in the face for a rare moment. Haruaki whispered in her ear:

"Come on... How could it possibly be cicadas!?"

"S-Shut up, human! The favorite food of a perverted organism like you, is crunchy, brown and can fly... What else is there apart from cicadas!?"

"The hostess already said clearly that flying is a stupid hint for the sake of appearances!"

"Q-Quiet, or I'll kill you. You should have written something more easy to understand! And that's clearly the silver hair's favorite food!"

"It's the answer I decided after much thinking to make it easier for you to associate...!"

"Uh~ The two of them seem to be whispering lovingly to each other. So, this girlfriend here, how are you feeling? Could it be that you're nervous?"

The host handed the microphone over. Shiraho instantly faked a smile and answered:

"Y-Yes, a little."

"I knew it, cicadas couldn't possibly have been right."

"Indeed, cicada season is clearly summer. I guess I got a little confused about the season."

"So it's an issue of season!?"

The audience went into an uproar as numerous stares were directed towards Haruaki, seemingly saying: "Could it be that this guy really eats insects...?" No no no, I beg you, everyone, please don't mistake this for the truth.

Stop saying things that'll cause misunderstandings—Haruaki cast a gaze of protest towards Shiraho beside him but she continued to wear a natural smile on her face. It was anyone's guess whether she was joking on purpose, scrambling for responses in desperation or simply trying to insult him.

"O-Okay, then get ready for the second question! We'll reflect a bit and give fewer hints. Let's go!"

Ding♪

"—'What's an activity that the boyfriend does daily?' Okay, please answer!"

This was even easier to guess than the previous question. Surely, Shiraho must know as well.

Holding the marker, Haruaki quickly wrote down "cooking" on the whiteboard. This could be described as his one and only hobby.

"This time, the boyfriend wrote the answer without hesitation at all! Lemme see, the hint is that it's done by hand!"

"Yes, it's something that all men do every day! Ohoh, I see now. This boyfriend here, despite your honest-looking face, who would have thought... Truly, people cannot be judged by appearances..."

"On the other hand, I think that's exactly the kind of impression he gives off~! Oh, time's up—!"

Just as before, the partition started moving on command. Please, get this question right at least! Haruaki prayed while turning his whiteboard towards Shiraho. Then he noticed that Shiraho was sneering in confidence unlike the last time. Finally, they were going to score a point—

"Cooking!"

"Stealing underwear!"

...

.....

It was just like last time. No, longer than last time.

Time stopped for quite a while before the audience went into a clamor again.

Shiraho was frowning as though going "How odd, why did I get it wrong again?" Haruaki approached her ear again.

"Hey! Why did you write this kind of answer with full confidence!? I can't believe you were chuckling with a sneer!"

"I did not reach the level of full confidence. Because until the last moment, I was still hesitating whether it should be 'peeking on people bathing' instead... After all, these are things that boys might do every day, possibly coming in handy, yes? How depraved and shameless."

"No normal person will write down this kind of answer without hesitation, okay...!?"

"I actually hold you in rather high regard. In terms of the ability to undertake shameless and perverted actions that no ordinary human could fully comprehend. That is why I was thinking, perhaps you might intend to confess your sexual crimes openly right here, thereby deriving a twisted pleasure from the public's eyes of scorn... Indeed, this is what I mentioned earlier, the fact of criminal rationality. Have you forgotten?"

"Gah! To think you could display that whiteboard under such serious conditions, that means you really believe that I'm that kind of person... I'm really a bit shocked to confirm this once again. One day, I must clear up your misunderstanding...!"

"Stop talking rubbish, the next question is up! At least get one right, human! I totally cannot see any effort on your part to cooperate with me. Show more cooperation!"

Haruaki could not help but sigh. On the contrary, he thought he was trying his best to cooperate already.

"Uh... I'm starting to discover that this is a couple that has many outrageous things worth pointing out... A-Anyway, there's not much time left so let's get on with the third question!"

"Yeah! I agree that we shouldn't pry too deep either!"

Ding♪

"Third question! Yes! This is quite a cruel question—'What's one thing about the boyfriend that's annoying?'"

"Ohoh! The girlfriend has suddenly started to write the answer rapidly without any hints! Then realizing that, the boyfriend has started to write as well—!"

Haruaki did not want to write. Honestly, he did not want to write the answer down at all. However, he had no choice.

Frowning while enduring the pain in his heart, Haruaki wrote those words down on the whiteboard.

"Okay, time for the reveal! Both sides' answers are—"

Ta da!

"Guh... P-Perverted..."

"Being a pervert!"

Shiraho, stop, don't announce it so loudly. Don't hold the whiteboard up with that kind of "Score!" expression. It's wrong, I simply abandoned my pride for the sake of scoring, but in actual fact, absolutely—

"Uwah~! I can't believe they got this one right!"

"I-I can't believe how this kind of answer matched... What an astonishing couple! Looks like these two are tied together by bonds that far surpass the realm of our common sense—!"

Facing the boyfriend who allegedly liked to eat cicadas, stole underwear on a daily basis and forced perverted behavior upon his girlfriend—

Naturally, the audience whispered intently among themselves while casting extremely cold gazes of derision.

Part 7

"Fu... Fu... Ha... Kufu, kufufufu!"

"Hey Cow Tits, calm yourself down. Seeing you so worked up, it's very scary to be honest. Don't laugh with bloodshot eyes, okay?"

"Fu... That's right, it's acting, a performance, fictional. Treated as a couple, it's all fake... I have to hurry and calm down, anyway, calm down first...!"

Since it was almost their turn, Konoha and Fear were together on standby next to the stage. After entering the stage, Haruaki and Shiraho had returned to the standby area with the foldable chairs. For the sake of mental health, Konoha avoided looking at them.

"Okay, I've calmed down. I've calmed down now."

"That block of concrete that your hand is resting on... By the time I noticed, it's already all broken and covered with slashes... I'll pretend I didn't see that."

"That is your imagination. Focus your attention on the upcoming task at hand. No matter what, in order to prevent those two from winning, we must score points here. After watching the contest so far, you know the rules now, right?"

"My favorite food is the rice cracker, yours is meat. That kind of question, right? Hmph, as much as I hate to admit it, we do live under the same roof after all, so I do know you to some extent."

"Very well."

The staff summoned them at this time, so the two girls walked onto stage. Although it felt uncomfortable to be stared at like exotic animals, there was no choice but to endure. Fear and Konoha sat down at the combined desks.

"So, next up is the special lesbian couple—and one of them is a pretty foreigner!"

"Woah! It's another astonishing couple! Anyway, let's first interview—"

"Skip the interview. Hurry up and start."

"Indeed. Please begin."

The two girls spoke with solemn eyes. Probably intimidated by their forcefulness, the host and hostess shuddered and retreated. No matter what, these two girls' only goal right now was to stop Haruaki's team from winning.

"Oh~ ...Okay, let's start immediately!"

"I agree! Uh, but just for framing the questions, we still need to clear this up first. May I ask which one of you is the boyfriend and who is the girlfriend—"

Konoha and Fear glared viciously at the host simultaneously. Clearly they had already expressed their wish to begin quickly.

"Eeek? Umm~ I get it! Then let's differentiate the two of you with the nicknames, Miss Braids and Miss Silver-Hair! Okay, first question!"

The host cried out in despair as the "ding♪" sound effect was heard.

"The girlfriend... Correction, 'What is one of Miss Braids' good points?' Please start answering!"

Konoha picked up her marker and started to think. Questions with defined answers like favorite food would be fine but this sort of subjective question was very difficult to answer. The important thing was not what she believed but what the other person thought. Provided she followed this line of thinking, her mind was able to become very calm with a high level of concentration. Then all that was left was for her to do what she needed to do.

Just like what Haruaki had shown earlier—Abandoning her pride, abandoning her sense of shame, simply advancing towards the target. Currently, that was what she must do.

"Okay, let's go—Please reveal the answers!"

This was the perfect answer she was supposed to write! Konoha raised her whiteboard up high and yelled. At the same time, Fear could be heard reading out her answer in an extremely pained voice with a bitter expression on her face—

"Even when run over by a car, the ability to survive using her own cushioning objects!"

"Gah! ...The fact that she's so kind and beautiful...!"

Instantly, Konoha slammed her whiteboard on the desk.

"Hold on a second—! Why are you reading the mood properly only at a time like this!?"

"Gwahhhhhhhh! You took the words out of my mouth, damn Cow Tits! I was thinking since it's you, surely you'd praise yourself shamelessly like this, why must... I say... such disgusting things against my conscience... Were I a puppet, my nose would have grown so long for sure! So embarrassing I wanna die!"

"I'm the one who's embarrassed! Now it makes me look like an eccentric who goes around flaunting the fact that her bosom acts as a cushion!"

"Yeah, but that's absolutely the truth."

"If that were the case, then just write it!"

Just at this moment, the two girls noticed how the surrounding audience was in shock. "C-Cough." Konoha and Fear forced a few coughs then turned away from glaring at each other to sit up straight again.

"Wow~ This is really difficult~"

"Ahaha, but it's very fun~"

The two girls were clearly lying through their teeth, trying to use smiles to keep the atmosphere under control. Then they psychically transmitted their thoughts to the host and hostess: Don't say anything, hurry up and ask the next question!

"U-Uh, okay, let's ask the next question..."

The first question just now had progressed in the worst way imaginable. Not only did they fail to score any points, but both of them suffered psychological trauma as well. The same mistake must not happen again. Konoha already understood that Fear also wanted seriously to win the contest. Hence, Fear was going to abandon her pride again like just now to match answers. In other words?

"Second question, something that we asked other contestants previously! Sorry, boyfriend... Correction, 'Miss Silver-Hair's flaw'! Please show some mercy!"

Konoha decided that, in other words, all she needed to do this time was write down the honest answer from her heart. Then their answers were going to match!

Hence, Konoha raised her whiteboard with full vigor.

"Never a quiet moment, totally like a childish brat!"

"So peerlessly beautiful that it's tragic!"

"..."

"..."

Without thinking, the two girls suddenly stood up with a clatter and glared viciously at each other.

Part 8

"Now for a change of location and a change of mood—The second half of the Couples Battle—The 'Woof Meow Lovey-Dovey Triathlon' officially begins!"

"Although it's called a triathlon, it's actually not that harsh a physical trial~ First of all, each couple will ride a pony together along these straight lanes to reach the other side! Then there's a task over there! Then each couple will make their way back in a three-legged race! That's how simple the remainder of the contest is!"

"Uh~ As for the scores from the first half... To be honest, it's almost a draw! So any team could take first prize as long as they win the triathlon!"

Haruaki and the others were taken to a place resembling a long and narrow field. Using metal fencing and ropes, the venue was divided into two rectangular spaces, one for the outbound leg and one for the return. Since it was a lawn, minor falls should not lead to injury. On the opposite end of the field relative to Haruaki and the contestants, in other words, at the turning point, there were a number of cuboid boxes resembling mobile toilets. What were they used for?

Probably thinking the same question, another contestant raised a hand to ask:

"Excuse me~ What's the task on the other side...?"

"I know how you feel, but it's a secret! As soon as you reach the opposite side, staff will explain to everyone! If we use the same task for this monthly event, contestants will come up with countermeasures beforehand."

"That's right. We won't announce the task on the other side until the last minute, so please bear with us! This is test of decision-making ability at a critical moment and the strength of the bonds between couples!"

In that case, worrying about it now was pointless—Haruaki nodded secretly to himself. Hence, he began to ponder something else he needed to consider.

"Say, it might be a bit late to be asking, but why did you two come along...?"

"N-No particular reason at all! It's not like I'm so childish as to believe in an urban legend! It's just that the risk is too great if it really were true, so this can't be helped, yes! In any case, there are many complicated circumstances, which is why we absolutely must not let you win, Haruaki-kun!"

"M-My reason is very simple! I just want to win first prize and bring the giant MeltyCat home, to give it good protection! I'll use it as a blanket, so fluffy and soft!"

Nearby next to Haruaki, Konoha and Fear explained themselves frantically. However, both of them were showing very serious eyes. Even if Haruaki asked them to withdraw for the Shiraho and Sovereignty's sakes, they would probably refuse.

Shiraho narrowed her eyes at the two of them.

"Oh dear, is that so...? Although I've no idea what this is about, sure enough, you two are enemies as well. Then I won't be holding back. For the sake of my future with Sovereignty, I definitely cannot concede that plush doll to you...!"

A blue-white battle aura seemed to be billowing from her back. One could describe it as a flame of extreme cold, releasing a presence both merciless and passionate.

"I-I won't lose either. Staying together forever, I absolutely forbid that kind of thing...!"

"I don't plan on backing down either! Don't expect me to show mercy—Ah! Hey Cow Tits, something is coming! Something with big round eyes and a short, chubby and furry body!"

"Okay~ So, the ponies for everyone to ride has entered the field. Also, please pay attention, everyone. Because these are relatively large ponies, it's possible to sit two people on them, but just in case for safety, each pony will have a member of staff in charge of holding the reins~"

During the explanation, each of the staff led a pony over to the contestants. The staff in charge of Haruaki and Shiraho's pony was a young woman.

With the staff's assistance, Shiraho mounted the pony's back then said with a scowl:

"In other words, even though it's a race... The speed ultimately depends on the pony's mood, doesn't it?"

"Ahaha~ Yeah, that's how it goes! Come, the boyfriend should sit at the back."

"Eh? O-Oh right, they said it's for two people to ride together. Then I guess I have to mount..."

Being unused to riding horses, Haruaki took quite some effort before he finally sat down on the pony. The back of Shiraho's head was right in front of his face. How should one put this...? There was a very lovely fragrance.

"How terrible, I feel like I'm getting violated through smell somehow. This is not rape by vision but rape by smell."

"I-It's your imagination, okay!?"

"Yes, although you are a new-type pervert who can convert into pleasure anything from a girl's body, be it saliva, bodily fluids, hair, scent particles or whatever, you probably aren't such a piece of trash that you would prioritize your pleasure right before this sort of important race, are you? You can prove this so long as you shove your fingers into your nostrils immediately, up to the third finger joint."

"Clearly the fingers will penetrate into somewhere fatal!"

After this exchange, Haruaki felt intense gazes. They were coming from Konoha and Fear who were likewise sitting on a pony. The two of them had their eyes half-narrowed. Fear was mounted in front with Konoha behind her.

Haruaki frantically distanced himself from Shiraho's hair (but riding the same horse, there was a limit after all), emphasizing the fact that he was not doing anything wrong. There were really too many things requiring his attention.

Under the staff's urging, the ponies carrying the contestants formed in a row at the starting line. Then—

"Looks like everyone is ready. Okay, 'Woof Meow Lovey-Dovey Triathlon,' start!"

Perhaps to avoid startling the ponies, there was no music or starting gunfire. The ponies trotted quite slowly. While the staff pulled the reins, the ponies moved forward while their hooves played a song evocative of countryside poetry.

But there was one pony—a pony that started next to Haruaki's team—which for some reason, started accelerating violently and galloping like a real racehorse.

"...Eh?"

At the starting line, a member of staff was left behind—the person originally supposed to be leading that pony—and was staring in puzzlement at the reins that had been cut by some sort of sharp blade.

Back when the cry of "start!" was heard, Konoha had leaned forward on the pony. Naturally, Fear was pushed down by her.

"Gwah!? Damn Cow Tits, what are you doing!? Why are you suddenly getting in my way!? Although it's always in the way already, right now, my back is feeling a bulging sensation even worse than normal, it's disgusting! Don't rest your weight on me! Back off now!"

"Please endure for a little while. I have words for this child."

She was a sword. A sword that had experienced countless battlefields. Hence, it was only natural that she knew how to control a certain type of military equipment, basic and powerful, used countless times on battlefields—The creature called the horse.

Although it had been a long time since she last used this technique, it should be fine if all that was needed was for the pony to run straight forward.

Konoha stroked the pony's mane lightly with her palm, then leaning further forward, she brought her lips to the pony's ear. At the same time, she reached out, touching the reins with her fingertips then whispered:

"Listen... Little horse, if thou hast no wish of becoming horsemeat—Thou ought to understand, yes? Thou wouldst best obey mine orders, 'twould be the happier path..."

Driven by animal instinct and terror towards absolute strength, the pony seemed to shudder its back once. Instantly, Konoha used a sword's power to sever the reins held by the staff. Obtaining freedom, the pony was now her servant.

"Charge!"

Obedying orders, the pony sped up all at once.

"Woah! I-I never expected it to be this fast. Say, Cow Tits, it's not right to threaten the pony like this, right!?"

"This is for the sake of the greater good! For victory I will resort to any means necessary!"

It was a bit underhanded but there was no helping it. A simple coincidence where the reins broke and the pony suddenly started to dash for unknown reasons—resulting in developments that happened to favor their team, that was all!

Konoha glanced back slightly to confirm the lead they had secured from the pony's gallop. All the other ponies were still trudging slowly, led by their reins. It looked like there was no further need to speed up—Just as she breathed out in relief, Konoha saw a certain scene.

"Uwah, it's not very stable... on the pony's back..."

"Kyah! Ouch, my bottom—Hey, where do you think you're touching, human!? I'll slaughter you!"

Suddenly losing balance violently, Haruaki fell forward, resembling Konoha's action just now, his body pressed down on the person in front of him. This was probably because he started off trying to keep his distance while on the pony, making it even harder to balance.

"S-Sorry! H-Hold on, uwah!"

"W-Wawawa, not only are you blowing on my neck but you're also touching my underarm!?"

"Uwah, don't struggle randomly, we'll fall... We really will fall!"

"Uh... Excuse me, the two of you, would you like to stop the pony first?"

Leading the reins, the staff suggested but Shiraho shook her head as she suddenly realized.

"No—The opposite. Please accelerate! And use the fastest possible speed! As for this rotten human, I shall deal with him this way!"

Shiraho wrapped her arm around Haruaki's neck, clamping him under her arm. But because she was using too much force, Haruaki found himself under her bosom rather than under her arm.

"H-Hey, Shiraho!"

"Shut up! You are simply baggage and a troublesome cadaver, indeed...! Better than falling down and wasting time. I will allow an exception this once. Hurry and hold onto my waist, cadaver!"

Shiraho was holding Haruaki's head under her arm in resignation. Meanwhile, Haruaki was wrapping his arms around Shiraho's slender waist in utter terror. It was anyone's guess what his head and hands were touching, or what kind of sensations, thoughts or scents he was experiencing while the pony's motion shook him up and down. Unable to bear the audience's gaze as they watched this heartwarming scene, Konoha—

"...Horse, head over to the six o'clock direction."

"Wha...!? Cow Tits, what are you doing...!? Why are we turning back a 180 degrees!?"

What am I doing? Truly a stupid question. Of course it is for enacting the Immorality Blocker (Equestrian Variant).

As a result, the two of them went back near the starting line and Konoha directed the pony's nose in a new direction, namely, to ride side by side with Haruaki and Shiraho's pony.

"Eh? Konoha...?"

From under Shiraho's arm, Haruaki stared in puzzlement at Konoha and Fear. Konoha responded with an unusually radiant smile—

"Wah~ I'm losing balance~"

"Despite your words, your hand is still reaching over, it's clearly very suspicious!"

Due to the instability of Haruaki and Shiraho's posture to begin with, all that was necessary was a light push to change their center of gravity. As a result, Haruaki's head instantly escaped from under Shiraho's arm and he fell from the pony's back. Seeing as the partner had fallen off, there was no choice but to stop the pony. While the staff was helping Haruaki up, Shiraho glared sharply at the two girls.

"I can't believe you're using such unscrupulous means...!"

"This is merely an unfortunate accident."

"...I basically agree. After all, it's like Cow Tits' limiter has been taken off today, I find complaining to her a bit scary, yeah."

Back to the starting line, the staff assigned to Konoha and Fear also ran over and swiftly repaired the reins. Severing it again would be going too far. Haruaki and Shiraho also mounted their pony again, riding normally this time, allowing the pony to advance. Konoha and Fear also relied on the reins as their pony began to race along sluggishly.

Although their speed had slowed and the lead gained in the initial dash was wasted, Konoha's mood still remained pleasant.

Because in her view, there was nothing more important than making sacrifices to prevent his indecent behavior.

Haruaki and Shiraho finally reached the turning point and quickly jumped off the pony. Although Konoha's inexplicable attack had thrown him off the pony, Haruaki was almost unharmed because the ground was grass.

Including Fear and Konoha, the contestants all reached the turning point at virtually the same time. Led by the staff waiting for them there, Haruaki and Shiraho arrived at the row of vertical cuboid boxes. The rules apparently required each couple to use one box.

"Okay, please enter together, the two of you!"

The staff pulled open the box's curtain. It's really like a fitting room—Just as Haruaki was thinking that...

"Taking place next is the 'Couples Clothes-Changing Speed Challenge' here! Girlfriends, please change into the outfit contained in the basket inside then start the three-legged race! Boyfriends will be assisting. Okay, please do your best!"

"What!? Hold on—!"

Forcefully shoving Haruaki and Shiraho into the fitting room, the staff then closed the curtain.

Haruaki and Shiraho stared at each other in silence.

"Hah! (Poke)"

"Gah! Please don't perform an eye-poking attack without warning! Can't you just ask me to cover up my eyes!?"

"In that case, hurry up and cover up your eyes! Are they covered? Covered already? If you dare peek, I will slaughter you. After gouging out your eyeballs and throwing them in the sewer, even if someone transplants your eyes and inherits your memories, all they will see is a paradise of feces and urine, that's how I shall kill you!"

"Totally nonsensical!"

Haruaki covered his eyes with a handkerchief then faced a corner. He could hear Shiraho sighing deeply behind him—Then...

Rustle, rustle.

The sound of friction from clothing.

(Urgh...)

Of course, the space inside the box was not wide at all. It really was as big as a fitting room. After covering his sense of sight, Haruaki seemed to find his hearing becoming more acute.

At this moment, there was a push against his bottom.

"Hmm?"

"Kyah! S-Shrink yourself further into the corner, human!"

"Uh, I can't shrink myself any further..."

His brain began to imagine without his consent. What had touched his bottom just now? Was it because she was taking off her skirt, their bottoms had touched together like in one of those pushing contests—No wait, not allowed to imagine!

"Hmm... This really was washed clean for sure, right... Hmm!"

Then after rustling noises persisted for a while, Shiraho suddenly groaned.

"What's wrong?"

"Utterly terrible. This is a design that is impossible for one person to wear on their own... Someone needs to help pull the zipper."

"S-So I have to help pull the zipper, right?"

He hesitated for an instant. But right now, they were racing against time. Shiraho clicked her tongue.

"In that case, you're the only one who can help—That's the only choice! However, listen carefully. You must act exactly according to my instructions! If you dare do anything redundant, I will slaughter you, human!"

"U-Understood."

"Well then, first turn around slowly... That's right. Then reach forward slowly with your right hand."

A soft sensation.

"I-I said reach forward slowly! What are you thinking, human!?"

"Ouch!"

His hand was slapped mercilessly by Shiraho. Where exactly had he touched just now...? It was probably better not to think about it. Next, he felt something weighing down on his arm, resembling part of a plush doll in texture.

"Argh, I hate this, time is of the essence right now. I will match your height, so relax your arm... Stop over here. Then bend your arm slightly and wait. I will turn around."

"What's the current situation? I don't quite get it."

"I am currently wearing something resembling a mascot costume, but in terms of design, I can't reach the zipper on my back and pull it up. So you have to pull the zipper now. That's all."

"You've put it on already, so pulling the zipper is the only thing left? In that case, it'll be easier if I take off the handkerchief—"

"W-What are you talking about, human!? Since the zipper is still down, ignoring the front side for now, the back is obviously half naked. My underwear is visible. You want to see it? Of course you want to see it! What a pervert!"

"Okay, I get it. Then let's continue like this."

"As much as I'd like to guide your hand to touch the zipper directly, my hand cannot reach. Listen carefully, I think the height basically matches now, so you only need to do this slowly, I repeat, slowly! Extend your hand forward."

Hence, Haruaki lightly straightened his bent elbow. Soon, his fingertips touched soft fabric.

"Kyah...?"

"W-What happened?"

"...Damn you! I must endure for now! You're slightly off, go a bit to the bottom left...!"

"Bottom left...?"

Haruaki had nothing to guide him except his sense of touch. Bit by bit, he moved his fingertips down. But every time he moved—

"Mmm! ...Gah, ah... T-Too far, idiot... Mmm!"

Shiraho's suppressed breaths were making it very hard for him to concentrate.

Haruaki thought calmly. Right now, he was trying to pull up the zipper on Shiraho's back and using his hand to search for the zipper's starting point. Where was the starting point? Along the spine, it should be somewhere near the lower back. Then the area extremely near that place, combined with the fact that he was searching with his hand, meant that in terms of

human anatomy, the only bodypart in that vicinity was probably the bottom—

(C-Could it be that I'm actually doing something very outrageous right now?)

Just as Haruaki frantically tried to move his fingers away first, his fingertip touched a different sensation. Something small and hard. A zipper. Feeling saved, he was just about to pull it up all at once when—

"Hold on! My hair will get caught in the zipper, so let me push the hair aside first... Okay, pull it up slowly..."

Zip— ...This sound alone was enough to make Haruaki think that he was doing something immoral. Why was that? Clearly he was pulling a zipper up, not opening a zipper.

"O-Okay, it's done...! You don't have to cover your eyes anymore."

Having obtained permission, Haruaki slowly took off the handkerchief.

Standing before his eyes was Shiraho in a white and fluffy mascot costume. Probably an animal, but he could not tell what kind exactly—Just as he was thinking that, Shiraho took out a long-eared animal's head from the basket. Allowing her hair to dangle behind her from the opening directly, she put on the animal's head.

The face was exposed in front. A rabbit mascot costume.

Seeing her dressed in this manner, Haruaki felt quite refreshed to be honest. Consequently, he could not help but stare intently.

"...What now? Hurry and go."

"Uh, I was just thinking, it looks surprisingly good on you."

Blushing with red cheeks, the rabbit rewarded him with a fluffy punch, but of course, it did not hurt very much.



Part 9

In the final three-legged race, Haruaki and Shiraho had to run back to the starting line. Although the contestants were surging out almost simultaneously, a few couples could be seen running already. Speeding up was imperative.

The staff used a string to tie Haruaki's foot with Shiraho's mascot costume-clad foot. "Hurry, do it faster!" Shiraho had already given up on maintaining her image, only grumbling and picking on the staff nonstop. Just at this time, something silver entered Haruaki's view.

It happened that Fear and Konoha had finished the clothes-changing challenge and arrived to start the race at the same time. Playing the girlfriend's part, Konoha was dressed in a striped tiger mascot costume, quite a refreshing sight as well.

Likewise waiting for the park staff to tie her foot, Fear was gnashing her teeth while glaring at Haruaki.

"Tsk! ...If it weren't for Cow Tits' udders, we'd be running already by now! Jeez, that useless volume only gets stuck in the mascot costume and is only good for preventing a quick change of clothes!"

"I-I can't help it either! If only the organizers prepared a looser fitting size from the start..."

Upon closer examination, Haruaki did not know if it was psychological or not, but it felt like the chest portion of Konoha's striped mascot costume was stretched especially tight. In order to stuff the volume there into the costume, the two girls must have gone through a tough battle beyond Haruaki's imagination.

"Oh dear... A tiger. In terms of the twelve animals from the Chinese zodiac, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the tiger is a relic of the past. Hope should be entrusted to a rabbit like me this year.^[3] Don't force yourself to run. Why don't you turn brown just like a New Year's greeting card from last year, forgotten in a cupboard and covered by a layer of dust?"

Shiraho, Konoha and Fear's belligerent gazes clashed in midair. This late in the game, was there any method to make them reach an understanding? Was there any method to resolve things peacefully—?

Of course—

It was impossible.

"Let's go, human! First start with the tied foot! Ready—!"

"Don't drag me down, Cow Tits!"

"This is very uncreative as a retort, but I have to say this—You took the words right out of my mouth!"

"Ready, go!" Just as the staff lifted their hands, Haruaki and Shiraho started running together. Starting with the right foot that was tied, one, two, one, two. Then gradually speeding up, they began to run with long strides. Shiraho was probably not too athletic. Haruaki was originally a little worried, but probably fueled by her love for Sovereignty, she was currently running quite well.

The two of them passed a pair of contestants, one of them wearing a dog mascot costume. Haruaki and Shiraho's speed was not bad. At this rate—Just as Haruaki was thinking that...

"Ahaha! Easy peasy! Although there's a problem, namely that dark creature, which should be named the evil pudding, bouncing and pressing on my head, making me feel so disgusted. But as long as I have this kind of athletic reflexes, a three-legged race is easy as pie!"

"I hope you don't get the wrong idea, but I am the one who is accommodating you! Don't talk as though you are the only one putting in effort!"

"Shut up, evil pudding! I'm the one who's suffering here! I'm currently closing my heart away with strong willpower, but if I lower my guard for a second, the ladylike boobs energy with the attribute of light, slumbering inside me, might suddenly rumble in action, compelling me to defeat the enemy! Like! This!"

"Hold on, I can't believe you're jumping to perform a headbutt while running a three-legged race, that's truly... dexterous... Mmm! Listen, Fear-san, please run seriously!"

Haruaki could see Fear and Konoha arguing noisily while passing his team. Then the two girls proceeded to pass a cat mascot couple, followed by a frog mascot couple—As expected of superhuman physical capabilities, their speed was leaving everyone behind. Also for some

unknown reason, the two of them were quite cooperative at the moment, making their way towards the same goal together. Haruaki had to concede that they were currently the greatest foes in the way of victory.

Since everyone's score was basically the same, the winner of the triathlon was going to become the champion directly. Losing was absolutely unacceptable.

However—

(Calm down a bit...!)

Haruaki realized that this was the only countermeasure.

In terms of power, he and Shiraho could not possibly prevail over Fear and Konoha. But considering openings that could be exploited, this three-legged race was not simply a contest of speed. Although Fear and Konoha were cooperating miraculously for once, they could not possibly maintain this indefinitely given their long-held incompatibility. A rupture was definitely going to appear again along the way. All Haruaki's team could do was endure and endure some more, not letting the momentary opportunity slip past—

That was what Haruaki understood.

However...

His partner, the partner who simply sought victory greedily for the sake of love, she did not understand.

"This is terrible! Don't think that you two will get your way... We're speeding up!"

"Hold on, Shiraho, don't push yourself too far! Don't panic, because it's us who will fall into a crisis if we panic—!"

However, Haruaki's advice did not work. Shiraho sped up all at once. Haruaki desperately tried to keep up but there were limits after all—

"Kya, ahhh!?"

"Gah!"

The two of them tripped and became entangled. The feeling of grass underfoot disappeared—Then they hit the ground.

They hit the ground heavily.

Haruaki felt an impact on his shoulder. Then the fragrance of fresh grass entered his nostrils.

Shiraho frantically sat up, staring wide-eyed in shock, looking ahead.

Looking at Fear and Konoha's backs, gradually getting farther and farther away.

Looking at the backs of the enemies who must be defeated in order for her to reconcile with Sovereignty.

"A-Ahhhhh...!"

What Haruaki heard was a scream of utter grief, as though Shiraho had witnessed the end of the world.

Struggling, she extended her arm forward, refusing to give up.

Seeking what was absolutely beyond reach and could not possibly be reached, she desperately extended her arm.

"No. I—don't want this... Sovereignty...!"

Within Haruaki's field of vision, all movements slowed down. It was as though time was being stretched. The world became static, shrouded in despair and regret.

But in the next instant, this unusual feeling was immediately forgotten.

Because, for some unknown reason—

Unbelievably, Haruaki found his body sliding forward at high speed even though he was still lying on the ground.

Part 10

Once Fear and Konoha passed the cow mascot couple, there would be no one else in front. Then all that was left was to rush past the finish line, thus accomplishing the mission of preventing Haruaki and Shiraho from winning first place—Just at this moment...

Fear noticed.

"...Hey."

"What's the matter?"

"I almost forgot, but if we win first place like this, and that legend turns out to be true—Then aren't we bound together forever?"

"...Oh dear! Come to think of it...!"

Due to excessive panic, the two girls' pace was disrupted a bit. Not enough for them to fall over, but their speed did go down.

In that instant, the surrounding audience could be heard entering an uproar.

What had happened? Hence, Fear looked back and saw.

A figure, dressed as a rabbit mascot, had caught up and passed her and Konoha all at once after they slowed down.

Shiraho was feeling quite perplexed.

"Hold on, this... What is going on...?"

Swiftly getting up, in the manner of a martial artist dodging a follow up attack, she then started to dash powerfully like a sprinter.

However, none of this was done intentionally by her own body.

It was her body that moved on its own. No, more accurately—

It was the rabbit mascot costume, wrapped around her body, which was moving on its own.

In other words—

Shiraho turned her head. In the corner of her eye, she could see amidst the audience.

"Shiraho~! Do your best, you're almost at the finish line—!"

"Sovereignty...!"

Hands cupped around her mouth, cheering for Shiraho was the lover whom she loved more than anyone in the world. Probably to replace the clothing that was soiled by the milkshakes, he was wearing a cat mascot costume, the same as Kuroe's.

Why? Why are you cheering for me? Didn't you hate me?

But Shiraho instantly cast these insignificant questions far away. Her lover was currently cheering for her. This was the only thing that mattered in the whole wide world. The sunlight's warmth was at a perfect level. The Earth was rotating around the Sun without anomaly, the universe was cooling down but not destroyed, all this must be thanks to him.

Hence, Shirao abandoned all doubts, simply running, running, running nonstop.

The lover was not only cheering for her but also using the «Sovereignty-Perfection-Doll»'s power—helping her by controlling the human plush doll. As long as she moved in concert with the plush instead of resisting it, the costume was equivalent to a second body, a second set of limbs that supported her.

It was almost like she was running while merged with her lover.

Hence—

"We... can't possibly lose...!"

At a distance of only several meters before the finish line, she caught up to and passed the silver-haired and bespectacled duo.

Then before everyone else—

Shiraho broke through the ribbon at the finish line.

The cheering was deafening. The host announced the result noisily.

Dazed for several seconds, Shiraho finally felt a sense of reality returning. Victory. Victory!

But unpleasantly, there was a groan coming from near her feet, sounding like a squashed toad, instantly destroying any lingering euphoria her triumph awarded her.

"Guah... Y-You finally realized? For the last half, you've been dragging me the whole time while running..."

Stuck to her foot was something resembling a tattered rag, looking up at her with eyes full of resentment. Thanks to Sovereignty's power, she had been able to forget this being completely and sprint forward nonstop.

Consequently, Shiraho spoke honestly straight from her heart without any pretense, looking at the tattered rag with eyes one would show when viewing a tattered rag.

"Oh my, you're actually here?"

Part 11

"It's ended... Everything's over..."

In any case, crossing the finishing line as second place, Konoha and Fear both hung their heads dejectedly. At this moment, the member of staff who had served as the hostess for the whiteboard Q&A happened to pass in front of them.

"A-Are you two okay? Did you get hurt? Should I call for the paramedics?"

"No, it's alright... Ufufu. Everything is futile by this point... To think we even pretended to be lesbian lovers for the sake of entering the contest..."

"Pretended? Oh, that explains why I didn't think you looked like a couple. But dear customer, why did you do that?"

"For... the legend. Those two who won first place this time... Ahaha, they're actually not going out at all... Yes, indeed, totally not at all!"

"Ah~ ...I think I understand what's going on now."

The staff nodded with sudden comprehension. Then after looking around suspiciously, she swiftly brought her face by Konoha's ear and said:

"Uh... Dear customer, since you seem to be someone who can keep secrets and because I sympathize with you as a fellow woman, I'll tell you this. But you must keep this to yourself. Actually, the legend about the Couples Battle was made up by our CEO to bring in customers. It was spread out only recently. It's actually completely baseless rumor without any effects at all. So please don't get so depressed—"

Konoha looked up suddenly.

"B-But, there's that! I heard that it became a legend on the internet and there are those wedding photos too!"

"Internet legends are just legends after all. It could very well be written secretly by the greedy CEO himself to lure in customers. Although the

wedding photos on the event poster are real, those winning couples already intended to marry in the first place, so this event wasn't the cause... Wah! D-Dear customer, are you really sure you're not into girls!?"

Spontaneously, Konoha hugged the staff in a mad fit of joy.

Time was approaching dusk.

After a simple ceremony similar to a prize presentation, the audience and the other contestants left on their own.

Haruaki rotated his neck lightly as cool down while watching the scene. Fear, Konoha and the returned Kuroe were also watching the same scene.

"Umm... This..."

Shiraho had changed back to her original clothing and was swaying awkwardly and unsteadily in unease. Hugged against her chest was the first prize conferred by the organizers, the super giant MeltyCat plush doll. She was hugging the doll like a child, looking up from time to time but timidly casting her gaze back to her feet. This repeated cyclically.

Shiraho's lover was standing in front of her. Sovereignty had changed out of his dirtied clothing into a set of cat pajamas (Kuroe probably told him where to buy it when accompanying him) and was pouting slightly, looking at Shiraho with displeasure.

Despite obtaining the tool for reconciliation, this did not mean that the issue could be instantly resolved with just the tool. After spending a great deal of time, Shiraho finally mustered the courage to speak.

"Th-Thank you... for helping me. Then, umm... why..."

"Hey Shiraho, I am currently a bit angry. Do you know why?"

Sovereignty interrupted Shiraho and said something that was obvious to any observer.

"That's..." Shiraho's gaze wandered, lost. Her attitude was full of hesitation as though saying she had thought of many possibilities and that she felt she was responsible, but did not know where to start. Given her usual intimidating arrogance, it was hard to imagine she had this kind of side to her.

Hence, Sovereignty sighed deeply in exasperation. Then puffing out his chest, he said face to face:

"Let me say this—no matter how good my temper is, Shiraho, I'll still get mad if you join a couples only event together with Haruaki-kun! Because Shiraho, your lover is me! Starting from before, continuing into the future, always!"

"Eh...?"

Shiraho looked up in disbelief.

"Y-You're not mad? You're willing... to forgive me?"

"Like I said, I am mad~! Jeez, why didn't you join the contest with me...? But I know I'm a little at fault for taking too long to change. If you waited for me, you'd probably have missed entering the event. But even so..."

"N-No, it's not like that! Before entering the event—Weren't you sitting on a bench, saying that my constraints are too burdensome, that I'm too constraining...?"

Sovereignty tilted his head in puzzlement.

"Huh? Did I say something back then? I wasn't mad back then, right... Oh, I remember now. It's because there was a doggy running around in the park and its collar looked like it was put on too tight and very painful. So I was discussing with Fear-chan what we should do. Are you talking about that?"

"!? Y-You also said something about starting over..."

"Yeah. That's why I said things had to start over again by taking the collar off and putting it on properly, right?"

"You said it was the owner's fault, and that you don't care anymore—"

"Yeah, that's right. Since it's his own doggy, he has to take care of it more thoughtfully! I think after that discussion, Fear probably made suggestions to the owner on my behalf... I wonder if they managed to put the collar back on properly."

Shiraho stumbled.

"No wait, not just these things—Right! The milkshakes! When I spilled the milkshakes on you, clearly you ran off with a displeased look without saying anything...!"

"Oh~ That? Shiraho, you must have ordered randomly without thinking! I know I definitely said that any flavor was fine, but not to that extent... The 'Kitty's Favorite: Horse Mackerel Flavor' is quite a B-class milkshake exclusive to this Woof Meow Friendship Park! I could still accept the 'Doggy's Favorite: Beef Jerky Flavor' or the 'Bunny's Favorite: Carrot Flavor' but that one is really too terrible. After it sprayed into my mouth accidentally, the fishy smell was really bad. I was thinking it'd be dangerous if I opened my mouth so I had to find a place to wash the milkshake off as quickly as possible—Wah!"

Shiraho suddenly hugged Sovereignty's chest tightly.

Her hair was quivering while she seemed to whisper something. Hearing that, Sovereignty suddenly relaxed his expression and gently caressed Shiraho's hair.

The rest of the group was standing slightly further away, watching the two of them. Konoha shrugged lightly.

"I guess this has finally reached a conclusion. It feels like I've been jerked around today by a ton of things... But no matter what, thank goodness there's no being bound together forever!"

"Although it's a shame I couldn't get that giant MeltyCat plushie, in the end, I can go see it any time whenever I go to Shiraho's house to play. It's true that I lost, so I'll let them have it without a fuss. However, I still want more MeltyCat merchandise—Before we head back, don't forget to visit the gift shop along the way!"

"Argh, my body hurts so much all over and even my mind seems to have suffered quite a lot of trauma... Ugh, I get the feeling that I'm the victim suffering the most harm this time. I hope the rumor of perverted cicada-eating guy doesn't start spreading in town..."

"Speaking of harm, I've incurred a huge loss too. Although I won't resent Sovey-chan for this, but to think there was such an amusing event as the Couples Battle, I can't believe I missed out on more than half of it. There must have been many rare and priceless scenes for everyone!"

The members of Haruaki's group each grumbled on their own while watching the scene with a faint smile of wryness on their face.

Watching the scene of lovers.

Progressively sinking west, the setting sun gave off an orange glow, enshrouding the two of them.

This sort of scene must be part of Shiraho and Sovereignty's everyday life together, Haruaki thought.

Arguing, getting stuck, anxious, worried, angry for trivial things.

But in the end, in a most natural manner, matter-of-factly, they always return to the closest position to each other.

How resilient, how unstable, how unbelievable, how inexplicable.

So this was probably what was known as love.

Hence, perhaps Fear was currently watching them with eyes of longing.

Hence, perhaps Konoha was currently watching them with eyes of admiration.

For these girls who were not human, for these girls who wanted to become human, this was a milestone in their eyes.

Haruaki would be very happy if they could carve this brightness into their hearts, if they could treat this as mental nourishment for the long road ahead of them. Initially, they had only come here for the purpose of spending the holiday, which was why they indulged Fear's impromptu whim, but right now, Haruaki believed from the bottom of his heart that it was really a wonderful decision. Although many painful memories were made, it seemed like he could easily toss them aside into the back of his mind.

Burying her face into Sovereignty's flat chest as a boy, Shiraho straightened her back awkwardly and embraced her lover again. This time, she wrapped her arms around his shoulders, allowing their faces to stay at the same height.

Shiraho was still holding the giant plush doll in her arms.

Hence, from the viewpoint of Haruaki's group, the two's faces happened to be blocked out of sight by the plush doll exactly.

"Hmm, although it's a shame I missed so many rare scenes, but—Never mind. I think this is more than enough to make up for my regrets. A great shutter chance~ Here I go."

The instant of memory was framed by the sounds from the shutter of Kuroe's camera.

Behind the plush doll right now, what the two faces were doing, drawn near to each other—

Even without seeing, surely everyone knew.

Chapter 4 - Snow-Melting Population Density

Part 1

One day, Haruaki's peaceful sleep was interrupted more noisily than usual.

"Oh no... Oh no oh no... This is serious, it's serious! Haruaki! Get up now—!"

"Guah—!?"

A super heavy force crushed the peaceful dream world. Haruaki felt the air being forced out of his lungs.

Frantically opening his eyes, Haruaki saw—

A girl was sitting astride his chest.

"I-It's serious, I have to repeat this no matter how many times, it's serious! Get up now! Hurry!"

"Guh ooph... W-What's so serious?"

With an expression that resembled both nervousness and excitement, Fear was staring straight at Haruaki from above. In contrast to Haruaki's sleepy eyes, her eyes were staring wide open. Fear even went as far as to lean her upper body forward, making a fist in front of Haruaki and saying:

"Listen carefully... First of all, it's very white! White to the extreme!"

"W-White...?"

Definitely very white. Haruaki's hazy mind gradually grew awake. His sticky eyelids also opened slowly, causing him to see the color of white clearly. The white of Fear's lower body as she straddled his chest. The white beneath her skirt. More precisely, orange stripes on a white background. Haruaki frantically averted his gaze.

"Also, how should I put this? Hyahhh—! Like that!"

"A-A scream...?"

"Your guess is totally wrong! I mean it's very cold! Icy cold!"

Very cold? No wait, Haruaki was experiencing warmth. The warmth from the thighs on his chest. The warmth and softness of skin. Fear was

inexplicably excited, omitting many keywords in her speech. Then she shook his body in agitation as though saying "You still don't get it?" Skin vibrating due to the shaking. Soft and warm thighs.

"Then there's the glittery shine! I've never seen that kind of brightness! Hey, you already know what it is, right? You figured out what the serious situation is, right?"

Fear pressed her upper body's weight against him again. Her shiny hair was brushing against his face. So bright. So ticklish. What dazzling, shiny brightness.

"Haruaki...? Are you listening?"

Oh, I'm still not fully awake. Haruaki could not help but reach out for that hair, with strong desire and tender affection. No wait, all he wanted to do was brush it away—

"Muumuu! You still look half asleep! In that case, I'll just have to let you see with your own eyes, get up now!"

"Eh? Ugh... Wawa!"

Fear grabbed Haruaki's extended hand, pulling him out from under his covers. In other words, she had forced him out of bed. With this, Haruaki's sleepiness was finally dispelled all at once. The thoughts from his semi-dreaming state and Fear's various sights he saw were suddenly making him very embarrassed. Haruaki tried his hardest to erase these memories.

Fear pulled him by the hand repeatedly, taking him out of the room directly. Still in pajamas, Haruaki felt very cold. So cold that it was a bit unusual.

"Hey hey, over here, over here!"

Pushing his back, Fear walked along the corridor. Then once they reached the veranda where the garden came into sight—

Haruaki figured out why Fear was so excited.

Taking a forceful leap, Fear jumped before his eyes. With the garden as the background, as though showing off the scenery, her silver hair scattered and flew as she spun around.

"See! It's amazing, right? It's very serious! I've never seen anything like this!"

"Ah..."

In that very instant—

Reflected in Haruaki's eyes, everything was equally bright and shining.

Only brilliantly radiant objects existed before him.

Glittering, glittering.

The twirling silver hair.

Fear's proud smile.

As well as—Formed from the accumulated snow fallen in the garden, an expansive world of white.

Part 2

"Oh my~ But yeah, it's anyone's guess how many years it's been since we've had so much snow."

"It probably started snowing since last night and it's still going. No wonder I felt so cold."

While staring out at the snowscape, they chatted together as usual—However, this was not the veranda where they usually used to hang out. As a side note, apart from Konoha, there was a visitor present.

Haruaki turned slightly to look at the visitor beside him.

"Class Rep, getting here must have been a tough journey. Sorry for inviting you so suddenly, but it's because Fear was making a ruckus, insisting that you come over."

"It's nothing. I happen to be free and it's a rare occasion of heavy snow. Compared to admiring the snowscape from my apartment's window, of course I'd have a better time over here with you... Cough, Fear-kun and the others to have fun together."

Amidst coughing noises, Kirika spoke in a serious tone of voice as befitted a class representative's style. However, her expression was very gentle with a faint smile on her face.

"Really...? Glad to hear that. But the question is, can this really be called having fun...? I'm so sorry for making you help out in this 'labor' activity as soon as you arrive."

"It would be absolutely ridiculous if you underestimated the weight of snow. Especially this kind of old house, a very serious accident could occur as a result, so it's best to take care of it as soon as possible—That's why I'd gladly help out with the snow shoveling."

Saying that, Kirika moved the shovel in her hand lightly, scooping up snow that had accumulated on the eaves.

Indeed, they were currently on the roof of the Yachi residence. Due to the house's age, the consequences of leaving a whole night's worth of accumulated snow felt rather scary. Hence, the whole group decided to clear the snow first. However, Haruaki felt quite apologetic to Kirika for asking her to help out with snow removal as soon as she arrived.

"Yeah... Especially if the roof tiles crack naturally because a certain very heavy person goes on this house's roof. If the house collapsed spontaneously, it'd be totally troublesome."

"Don't let it weigh on your minds. After all, I'm the one who offered to help on my own. Also, since this is my first time shoveling snow, it's actually not a bad experience... By the way, did you invite Sovereignty-kun and Shiraho-kun?"

"Yes, we basically tried, but as expected, Shiraho-san found it too much of a bother."

"That's true... Definitely, neither playing vigorously playing in the snow or having an elegant snow viewing would suit her personality. Despite this rare snow, I can imagine her saying with a scowl: 'What on earth is with this cold-producing device? I really wish for its hastened destruction.'"

Speaking of playing in the snow with full vigor—Haruaki turned his gaze and looked down towards the garden below.

Two girls with figures resembling little children—Fear and Kuroe—were playing with the accumulated snow childishly indeed.

Fear must be seeing this kind of heavy snow for the first time. She seemed to find everything refreshing, showing great enthusiasm for all things, laughing heartily one moment, screaming in surprise the next, meanwhile

running about over the snow-covered ground. At this moment, she suddenly stayed in one spot, then using the gloves Haruaki had given her as a return gift last year for Christmas, she scooped up snow and sprinkled it over her head. Snowflakes landed on the tip of her nose. Fear giggled again. She was really enjoying the current situation from the bottom of her heart. Although Haruaki had no idea what exactly was so interesting, just watching Fear was enough to bring a smile to his face.

Meanwhile, Kuroe was currently picking up snow in her tiny hands, then staring at the mass of white snow with her blank eyes as usual, she looked like she was pondering something. For sure, she must thinking of a new and original way to play with snow.

"Those two girls, seriously... Clearly they should be in charge of moving the shoveled snow away."

"They're already prepared after moving the wheelbarrow out from the storeroom. I guess they're just waiting for us to issue orders. After all, we did say earlier to wait until a certain amount piles up before moving the snow. Yeah, speaking of which, there's quite a lot accumulated down there now, it's almost time for—Oh?"

Just as Haruaki was about to stand up and call for Fear and Kuroe, he slipped. Luckily, he only lost balance slightly, but that was enough to send chills instantly down his back.

Finally regaining his balance, Haruaki then felt something pulling lightly on his waist. Looking down, he saw that the belt extended from Kirika's sleeve had already wrapped it self around his waist. It was just a tiny accident and actually did not need such a frantic rescue, but even so, she still extended her belt towards him immediately to serve as a life line.

"Th-Thank you. Don't worry, I only slipped slightly."

Hearing Haruaki, Kirika and Konoha frowned and objected.

"I was just thinking, this work is unexpectedly exhausting for both the mind and the body. Your legs are probably losing strength because you are tired, Yachi. You should hurry and leave the roof."

"Indeed, just leave the rest for Ueno-san and me to handle."

"Really? Yeah, I do feel a bit tired then I'll take your advice... Okay, I'll go help Fear and Kuroe down there. You two be careful too."

Haruaki decided to leave the roof obediently because it would cause everyone trouble if he really slipped and fell off the roof. Descending slowly down the ladder, he met up with Fear and Kuroe in the garden. In the middle of playing to her heart's content in the snow, Fear looked up.

"Hmm, what's up? Things are finished up there?"

"I've been fired because my legs are starting to get shaky. My next task is to supervise you two. Okay, stop playing. There's quite a lot of snow shoveled from the roof, so you need to move it over to a corner—Hey Kuroe, what are you doing...?"

Narrowing his eyes, Haruaki looked towards Kuroe as she started engaging in strange behavior.

Still displaying sleepy-looking eyes as usual, Kuroe was slowly adhering chunks of snow in her tiny hands against the chest of her coat. Adhering, again and again. Seeing the snow about to fall off, she plucked her own hair to use as wires for reinforcement. Hence, what she produced was—

"Th-This is... Truly a new sensation of weight! I wasn't just trying out a snow bra without thinking too much into it, but never did I expect to manifest a simulation of our ideal futures! Reporting! I predict this to be the state of things by next summer!"

"What a fast approaching future! Say, I can't believe you're indulging yourself in crafting this kind of simulation, leaving me behind as the leader of the Ladylike Bosoms Alliance, that's going way out of line! ...C-Cough, I'm relying on you for my share."

"A piece of cake~"

Fear puffed her chest out while Kuroe patted and piled snow onto her, inserting hair into them for reinforcement. "Those two children are playing bizarre games again..." Konoha could be heard grumbling in exasperation from above.

"There, there, How's that?"

"Oh... Ohoh...! So big, no, it's extra big! They feel so heavy!"

"Experimentally, I've copied the size and shape of nearby ready-made products. This is for the sake of realism... Hmm, speaking of realism, let's upgrade the level of resemblance slightly. This time, it's an experiment with heavy emphasis on detail."

Holding a bundle of hair in her hand, Kuroe began to sculpt Fear's snow bra cautiously as though she were playing one of those mold-carving games at festival stalls. Shortly after, Kuroe made a sweat-wiping motion on her brow as though going "Okay, done!" and stepped back from in front of Fear. Hence, Haruaki was finally able to see what she meant by detail—

"Pfft...!?"

"A-Absolutely ridiculous!"

This time, two people's voices were heard from above.

Rather than a bra on top of Fear's clothing, the finished product was more like an extremely realistic model of breasts. The mounds of snow bulged in an extremely natural shape, tracing out flowing curves, then under Kuroe's skillful rendering, the protruding tips were tiny—

"Hold on, Kuroe-san! Such realistic breasts are too immoral and unwholesome in public decency—Hmm? Hmmm?"

Konoha warned Kuroe frantically but her sentence suddenly turned into a question. Kuroe answered calmly with confidence:

"I believe that erotic art like Venus de Milo is publicly accepted, you know? Also, just as I said earlier, I referenced the size and shape of ready-made products. If you want details, it's my memory from having a bath together. Even I can't help but think how fortunate it is that I always stared intently just in case it might come in handy one day."

"Ready-made products... Somehow I find the shape rather familiar... No way..."

Konoha's voice began to tremble. In contrast, Fear pouted slightly as she looked down at her simulated snow breasts.

"Hmm~ I get it now, so this is an experimental imitation of the enemy, I guess. My shoulders feel so heavy, it's difficult to look down and it's so heavy that I feel like it's life threatening... Ohoh, I can't believe it's this unsightly, this ugly and this much of an embarrassment! Also, it shifts my center of gravity to a weird spot, making me walk unsteadily, what a weird sense of balance. I knew it, for something existing on this planet, these things are way too unnatural, the culmination of recessive bad genes that need to be purged from evolution immediately!"

"A-Ah... Awawawa! H-Haruaki-kun, it's not like that! Although its excessive realism makes it look real, that's not actually the real thing and there are slight differences from mine. I don't think the tips are like that either, so I hope you'll believe me—Awawa, despite those clearly being mounds of snow, why do I get this embarrassing feeling like I'm getting seen topless by others!?"

Haruaki could tell simply from her voice that Konoha was totally panicking. Hence, without thinking, Haruaki looked up at the roof where the two girls were standing. Accidentally, unavoidable. Even though he was not supposed to look up.

"N-No, uh, let's put this aside for now, you should be careful where you step... Ooh!"

"What are you going 'ooh' and telling me to watch my step for!? Compared to that, taking care of Kuroe-san's creations must be prioritized!"

Haruaki carelessly looked up at Konoha and Kirika who were standing on the roof. Naturally, since they had not started the day with the intention to go snow shoveling, consequently, neither of the two girls were wearing clothing meant for the task. Instead, they were dressed as usual—having climbed to the roof in skirts. And now, Haruaki was looking up at them from below, accidentally.

Previously, the fact of their attire did not matter when he was together with them on the roof, but now it was bad. Very bad. Just as this occurred to Haruaki, Kirika and Konoha seemed to notice his gaze as well.

"Taking care of that... Ah, kyah! H-Haruaki-kun—!"

"Y-Yachi! Hey! Absolutely ridiculous, w-where are you looking at—!"

As a result, the two girls tossed away their shovels at the same time and frantically held down their skirts with their hands, squatting down reflexively. However, they were currently standing on a snow-covered roof and forcing themselves to squat down while leaning forward, due to throwing criticisms at Kuroe's snow breasts and giving panicking explanations. No matter how good their athleticism, they still lost their balance, of course—

"Uwawawawawa! «Black River»... N-No good, I can't grab anything...!"

"Oh no—! H-Hurry and move out of the way, Haruaki-kun, move out of the way now—!"

In the next instant, reflected in Haruaki's eyes was a pair of figures flying off the eaves at high speed like ski jumping off a take-off ramp. Namely, they were Kirika and Konoha, holding their skirts down with panic all over their faces. The two girls fell straight down, falling on Haruaki while he was looking up at them.

—Then came the final impact.

"Guff!?"

Haruaki felt his consciousness leave for an instant but immediately regained his senses. It took him a few seconds to realize that the coldness against his back meant he was currently lying on the snow-covered ground. In contrast, the front side of his body felt rather warm. What was going on?

"Muguugo...?"

Despite clearly opening his eyes, Haruaki found his view totally dark. Rather, black was the only color he could see. Furthermore, he found it inexplicably difficult to breathe. In other words, something black was pressing on top of his mouth—

"Kyah! Hold on... Yachi, Yachi, ridiculous, absolutely ridiculous!? Listen carefully, don't move and don't speak anymore! And don't move your nose either! Not allowed to breath, even! I'm getting up straight away!"

Haruaki felt a hard sensation on the tip of his nose, similar to a zipper. No way, could this be Kirika's that? Fortunately, his brain's natural defensive instincts kicked in and proactively gave up on clearing up the issue. I neither know anything nor understand anything.

Then he noticed the weight on his lower body. Another object was covering his body below the waist. Naturally, he could not see because a certain black object of Kirika's was blocking his view, but based on touch, he could discern that there seem to be two masses on top of his lower body. Moreover, they were very soft, very warm and quivering with gentle softness, sandwiching his lower body—

"Ouch... Wah! Sorry, Haruaki-kun, are you okay? Did you break a bone somewhere? Are you alright?"

Accompanied by the nervous voice, Haruaki felt that sense of weight press even harder against him. Almost enveloping his entire lower body, this softness and warmth. No good, I can't allow myself to think about that side either.

At this moment, he suddenly regained light in his view. Stumbling forward to separate from his face, Kirika crouched down partially nearby, reaching behind to hold down her skirt near her bottom. Whimpering with her face flushed red, she was looking at Haruaki, possibly glaring at him.

However, Konoha's weight was still resting on his lower body—more precisely, that weight of Konoha's was still pressing on him. Haruaki was unable to move as a result. What should he do in order to move away? Konoha did not seem to be listening to him. Was it okay if he simply pushed her away? But pushing her would require touching that directly, which was actually a huge problem—Just as Haruaki's brain was spinning at full speed, pondering the monumental difficulties of this mission—

"I'll say this again, the sense of balance is very weird just as I thought. I don't want this kind of thing. I'm throwing it away."

A certain white mass flew past. Then—Smack!

A massive piece of snow directly struck Konoha's head while she was still mounted on Haruaki's lower body worriedly. The snow instantly flew apart into fragments. Haruaki went stiff all over. Naturally, the snow came from the imitation breasts that had been installed on Fear's chest a moment ago. After taking a look at Konoha, who seemed frozen in time with snow all over her braids, Fear nodded with satisfaction.

"I've heard of the game known as a snowball fight. Yeah, so in other words, what I want to say is that udders of this size have no value except for being used in a snowball fight while preventing shameless behavior at the same time—Take that! Next comes the shot from the left boob—!"

Plucking off a (temporary) body part from herself, Fear threw it forward. However, Konoha slowly separated from Haruaki's lower body from her originally frozen position. Just as Haruaki saw her standing up—

"..."

A flash of the sword. Sliced cleanly into two, the snow breast fell tragically by Konoha's feet. Retracting her karate chop, Konoha bent over lightly and picked up the remains of the snow breast.

"What is with this sense of guilt...? But rest assured, I shall avenge you."

"Owa—«A Hatchet of Lingchi»!"

This time, Konoha fired a white bullet towards Fear. Taking out the Rubik's cube from her pocket reflexively, Fear transformed it into a torture instrument to deflect the snowball. Clang! The sound of a metallic collision rang out.

Probably reeling back from the impact, Fear readied her hatchet in a stance unsteadily while Konoha was holding the remnants of the snow. Slowly closing in on each other, both girls were grinning maliciously.

"Fear~-san~ Although I was originally planning to have you work properly... Since you want a snowball fight that badly, there's no helping it, I shall accommodate your wish. Nevertheless, my snowball fights will not be so gentle."

"Took the words right out of my mouth. Since it's my first snowball fight, I'm sorry that I don't know how to adjust my strength. If I go too far, feel free to cry surrender in all unsightliness. Or better yet, surrender now!"

In the next second, snowballs began to fly back and forth. Using the hatchet to dig snow by her feet, Fear made giant chunks of snow to throw at Konoha. Using karate chops to engage, Konoha sliced the pieces of snow, making small snowballs out of them, then catching the snowballs in midair and launching them in succession. Sometimes, she used spinning kicks to deflect the incoming snow. On the other hand, Fear turned her weapon into a drill instantaneously then using it as support to jump like pole vaulting, she evaded all the attacks. Then the two girls glared at each other, cautiously adjusting their distance before starting another wave of intense attacks—

Haruaki could only watch the scene with a stiff smile. At the same time, Kirika seemed to have finally recovered from her confusion earlier, coughing drily.

"Yachi, shouldn't we stop them?"

"Haha... Once it develops to this point, stopping them won't be that easy. Oh well, instead of a hand to hand brawl, this is more like a snowball fight. They're mainly throwing snowballs at each other, that's all. As long as they keep this level of understanding, it's much safer than their usual fights—"

"Just when you think that, an enemy lying here in ambush appears!
Openings to exploit!"

"So cold——!"

Suddenly feeling a wave of coldness against his back, Haruaki could not help but jump to his feet.

"Nwoh—!? Huhee, huha, huhahaheehee!?"

"Hyah... S-So cold... What is going on!?"

"Kyah!?"

Apart from Haruaki, three other people also cried out at the same time, straightening their backs. Haruaki could not help but find the scream coming from a certain person beside him especially adorable, but decided not to dwell on the issue. Naturally, the culprit was the final person who had not screamed.

"I am the woman intoxicated by the joys of betrayal... Ahaha~ Dance for me~"

"Guh, Kuroe! What are you doing!? You stuffed so much snow into my back!"

It turned out that Kuroe had secretly manipulated her hair to stuff snow into the clothing of Haruaki and the others simultaneously. Reaching behind himself, Haruaki pulled out his shirt's lower hem and shook off the snow that had invaded his clothing.

"Hooaha, so cold, so ticklish! So that's what it feels like to have snow getting into your clothing. I guess that's a lesson learnt. But anyway, huheehee! I-I must hurry get rid of it!"

In addition to Haruaki, everyone else also had snow stuffed down their collar relatively normally. Fear, Konoha and Kirika were desperately clearing snow out from under their clothing. Fear was frantically lifting the front of her shirt, pulling her skirt down, giving tantalizing glimpses of her navel and other parts. Konoha had pulled her collar open, hence almost offering a glimpse into her cleavage, then perhaps because snow was stuck inside, she was reaching into there with her fingers. The sight looked quite dangerous. Under Kirika's clothing, the black object, which was not supposed to be seen, was also flashing in and out of view seductively—Haruaki frantically focused his attention on clearing snow

from his clothing. But after cleaning up, Haruaki still pretended to continue, pulling at his clothing meaninglessly, trying his utmost to enter a realm of oblivion. Is everyone done yet? Hurry and straighten out your clothes.

"Hey Kuroe! What are you doing!?"

"Since it's not every day that we get snow, I suggest opening your hearts and having as much fun as possible. In other words—clearing the accumulated snow that was shoveled from the roof can be done later! Also, how could I let Ficchi and Kono-san start playing on their own? Now is the time when everyone should join in for a blood-boiling snowball battle royale! What I just did was the first wave of attacks to declare war!"

"Listen here... I was simply looking to punish Fear-san a little. If you want a snowball fight, just play on your own with the others, Kuroe-san."

"Just so that everyone will play seriously to their heart's content, I've got a suggestion. Uh... The winner of the snowball fight earns the right to command one of the losers present, how's that?"

"Oh... One of the losers... present...?"

For some reason, Fear and the girls spoke simultaneously then for merely an instant, their sharp gazes all seemed to converge on Haruaki... Perhaps. It could also have been his imagination.

"Cough, I've changed my mind. It's not a bad idea to relax and play like a child at heart every now and then."

"Yeah, this is a rare chance with so much snow fallen. Having as much fun as possible is the only way to go."

"It would be truly and absolutely ridiculous if all I did before going home was shoveling snow and having tea after being invited over on this rare occasion. Sure enough, it's better that I get some exercise and have fun."

The three girls changed their minds with inexplicable readiness, expressing their intent to join the snowball fight with casual tones of voices. However, the only things casual were their voices and the expressions on their faces. Their actions stood in stark contrast.

Konoha knelt down and began to cut up the snow by her feet, using karate chops that moved so rapidly that afterimages could be seen—processing them into the shape of snowballs. Fear swung the spiked club of metal at air, leaving Haruaki puzzled as to how she intended to use that weapon.

Kirika also started using the cursed belt, the «Tragic Black River», to pick up snowballs and practice throwing. Completely opposite to their claims which sounded like "no helping it, I guess I must participate," their actions were full of seriousness. Tension hung in the air. It was as though the girls were declaring they would show no mercy no matter what.

So thirsty. Despite his bafflement, Haruaki felt a sense of foreboding. He gulped hard.

"U-Umm, I haven't said whether I'm joining in or not, but I guess I have to, right...? Uh, oh, right! While you girls are having fun, I can clear the snow leisurely, wouldn't that be a good method to make everyone happy, right...?"

But the three girls—including Kuroe with her blank eyes, four warriors—ignored him, of course.

The four of them faced off against one another while giving off an atmosphere as though fighting would break out any moment.

The tension in the air heightened further. The space of pure white was distorted so much that it sounded like creaking.

Hence, just as the sense of nervousness peaked—Konoha's glasses flashed as she asked:

"I forgot to ask, but what are the conditions for victory?"

"Obviously the last one standing. After all, it's a battle royale."

"Then conversely, allow me to ask... What are the conditions for defeat?"

"Isn't that obvious? It's when the losers scream surrender on their own——!"

With Fear's yell as a signal, the heavy pressure, feeling as though time had stopped, exploded instantly.

Then with snowballs, karate chops, torture instruments, a leather belt and human hair flying all over the place, amidst resounding shouts and roars, an ordinary snowball fight took place.

Part 3

"Hoo... Wars always make you feel empty inside..."

Reaching the realm of enlightenment, Haruaki sipped hot tea while sitting on the veranda. On his left and right, Kirika and Konoha were also sipping tea respectively, utterly exhausted mentally, catching their breath.

In addition, next to Konoha, Kuroe was totally limp and unmoving from exhaustion, looking as though her soul had left her body. Due to the snow boobs incident earlier, Konoha had focused her ice-cold attacks on Kuroe, forcing Kuroe to surrender early on. Apart from Kuroe, as well as Haruaki who had given up first thing(surrendering unconditionally, one could say) out of concern for his life's safety, the other three girls had not settled the contest between them... Since the rules required losers to admit defeat, conversely, no winner was possible if none of them were willing to surrender. Naturally, it resulted in total exhaustion on all sides.

In the end, the snowball fight turned into an invalid match of total stamina attrition without any winner at all. However...

"Here I go, here I go!"

"Wow, she's a lively one..."

Only Fear had recovered her energy and starting a while ago, she had been rolling a snowball the size of a football.

Pushing the snowball rhythmically with her hands, she rolled it bigger and bigger with a serious expression on her face, resulting in quite a heartwarming scene to behold. Haruaki smiled faintly. The ability to enjoy a first experience from the bottom of her heart—Perhaps this could be considered a type of talent.

"Fufufu, it's looking better and better, then I'm gonna speed up! Here I go, here I go... Ohoh? Crap, I can't stop it anymore!"

Fear rolled the snowball even more rhythmically, passing in front of the veranda where Haruaki and the others were resting, rolling towards the entryway.

"Perfect, then I'll go outside directly for a walk like this! When I come back, it'll surely grow so large it'll be astounding... And it's almost enough to reach my next goal, to build a snow man. Please look forward to my return!"

"Slow down there, I can do whatever you want in the yard but not outside. The snow-covered streets are very dangerous. Also, more specifically, your snowball could hit pedestrians or bikes and make people fall."

"Muu~ On the other hand, I really think it's wrong for people to go biking on a day like this."

"Although you have a point, it's still too dangerous, so just play in the yard... But judging from the way you look, you're not gonna listen even if I say that, right?"

"Duh! How can I stay cooped up at home on a special day like this!?"

"Can't be helped, then I'll have to go out with you to supervise you. Konoha, you girls can..."

"If you're going out, Haruaki-kun, I am coming along too."

"Then I'll accompany as well."

"Phew~ I've finally revived... Of course I'm coming together too~"

Haruaki was going to ask them to watch the house but Konoha, Kirika and Kuroe all expressed their wish to go out together. As a result, it became a stroll for everyone to take outside.

"Good, let's march, troops! Oh of course, I have to walk at the very front, because I want this little guy to absorb clean snow. Let's go, my snowball, go on and store up a ton of snow energy!"

"Ficchi~ May I help? If you're building a snowman, you need two snowballs, right?"

"You're right. Okay, Kuroe, I appoint you as lieutenant general! If you start rolling now, you'll make a snowball that's just the right size to put on top of mine!"

"Yessir~"

Fear exited the front entrance while rolling her snowball. Several seconds later, Kuroe followed after her, pushing a newly formed snowball. Immediately, Haruaki, Konoha and Kirika filed out after them.

As soon as they stepped out of the home, it was a totally different world outside.

Amidst a snow-white landscape, the girls were walking ahead, swaying their hair, silver and black respectively.

(...)

In the beginning, Haruaki had objected simply due to the one reason that he did not want Fear to wander around outside alone.

But this scenery was probably only visible on a special day like today. It was anyone's guess when another time would come again.

As soon as he thought that... Whatever, I guess this might not be bad after all.

Bearing a slight smile of wryness, Haruaki thought to himself while leisurely chasing after Fear and Kuroe.

Part 4

Fear was using both hands to push the pure-white mass of snow. Left, right, left, right. Bit by bit, the snowball slowly grew large. This alone was already enough to fill her with joy.

The air was chilly. Looking up, one could see the ordinary town different from usual.

Utility poles covered with white snow. Wearing soft, fluffy caps of white, the post boxes looked very fashionable, different from their usual shade of pure red. White snow were piled upon nearby trees in long thin shapes, looking like marshmallows or clouds. Identical to the cotton decorations visible during the Christmas season—No, the analogy ought to be reversed in the first place. At the bottom of a wall, which one would not normally notice, fluffy, clean, white snow was piled up, pristine and untouched. One could call this a zone of fortune for bolstering this snowball. Let's go and absorb this snow!

"Here I go, here I go! I'm gonna make you big and pretty~"

Fear sped up even more, rolling the snowball along the bottom of the wall. She wanted to make it even bigger, to make a snowball so big that Haruaki was going to fall over in shock.

"Mufufufu... Hmm, on my?"

"Woah, be careful! Phew~ My beloved snowball Goliath-kun (tentative), the one I've been nurturing till now, almost fell into the gutter. Ficchi! Why did you suddenly stop?"

"No, it's because it feels so lively over there."

Next to the road was a small park where roughly ten children were inside, playing happily with the snow on their own. In addition, there were two adults, a middle-aged man with an elderly man about to enter the latter stages of life. They were watching the group of children with tender eyes of affection. Somehow, Fear felt that the two men looked slightly familiar.

At this moment, the middle-aged man discovered Fear's group. Raising his hand lightly, he called out:

"Oh it's you, Kuroe-chan."

"Hello~ I guess business must be bad after such heavy snow... Left without a choice, I've decided to devote all my effort to having fun. So what are you guys doing here?"

"I also left the shop for my mother to watch. Since it happens that a children's gathering was planned for today, everyone's all gathered so I've brought them to play in the snow here."

It sounded like this man was apparently one of Kuroe's friends from the shopping street. The other, elderly man also walked up and said:

"Since it's rare to have this much snow, it's good to let the children experience more of it... Oh, you must be Honatsu's kid, right? Hahaha, going out with so many cute girls, you're so blessed."

"Eh? Ah, uh, umm... Hello."

Haruaki bowed his head as a greeting, not knowing how to react. In contrast, Konoha offered pleasantries with all smiles: "Such flattery, you really know how to talk, ohohoho." Kirika also nodded to greet slightly shyly.

At this moment, Fear suddenly sensed a presence approaching her. Turning to look back, she found a little girl, probably in early elementary school, currently staring at her and the giant snowball.

"Hey lady, is this a snowman?"

"Oh? Fufufu, so you really can tell? Yes, you're right, it's a snowman... Do you want to see the completely assembled snowman?"

"Yes please."

The little girl's eyes glimmered brightly while she answered instantly. Now I really must respond to the kid's anticipation.

"The size is almost ready... Okay, Haruaki, let's stay in this park for a while. I'm going to have the snowman combine here! Kuroe, are you ready?"

"Of course~ From the start, I've also prepared things like charcoal to put on the face."

"Excuse me... You guys don't mind if we join in as well, right?"

Haruaki asked the adults who were leading the children. Smiling genially, they replied: "Of course, you're very welcomed."

Rolling her snowball, Fear walked over to the center of the park. Since the snowball had grown quite huge already, all the children's gazes were gathered here... It felt so nice. However—

"...?"

Not every child was looking towards her. Only one girl was uninterested, immersed in her own game. No wait, could that really count as a game? She was simply sitting on the ground, using a small shovel to randomly collect snow, piling it up to make a mound. From her expression, she did not seem to take much joy in her task. Sitting some distance away from the other kids, she did not even look in the direction of Fear's snowball, simply alone all by herself...

"Ficchi, it's best to assemble the snowman here, right?"

"Ah, yeah, you're right."

In any case, the snowman needed to be completed first. Rolling the snowball, Fear placed it at a spot which would not interfere with the playground equipment, then Kuroe pushed Goliath-kun (tentative) next to it.

"So, the next part is key. Shameless brat, I won't allow you to fail. Show me some spirit!"

"I guess I have to help? Yeah, sure."

"Have you gotten a good grip? Okay, let's do it... COM. BINE—!"

Fear and Haruaki picked up Goliath-kun (tentative) together and placed it on the body. After carefully adjusting its balance, they released their grips lightly. Positioned. Maintaining perfect balance, it was positioned there!

"Ohoh...! Th-This is...!"

"Ficchi, it's still too early to feel moved. Now that we've reached this point, we have to pay attention to detail. I will use charcoal to make the snowman's face. Uh... It'd be nice if only there were other materials that could be used for the arms."

"Lady, let me go pick up branches, 'kay?"

"Then I'll lend the snowman my scarf."

"Ohoh, you're so kind and understanding, kiddies! Great, let's all cooperate to make this guy a perfect snowman!"

Originally just one snowball on top of another, the snowman gradually obtained life after receiving the children's support. After the face was done, arms then sprouted and gloves were added. All this was so fun and delightful. Watching was enough to make one grow with joy.

However—In the end, that girl just now...

All lonesome by herself, she continued to build her mountain of snow, still not glancing over at Fear's snowman at all.

Part 5

"I-It's done—! Totally perfect!"

"So big~!"

"So amazing, it's like a snowman you see in picture books!"

In front of Haruaki, the children were looking up at the assembled snowman, cheering happily. Mixed among them, Fear and Kuroe also displayed satisfied smiles. Especially Fear, who also pointed at the snowman and said: "That part's really good, it's awesome. Yeah, don't you guys agree?", commenting on various things together with the children as though holding an appraisal conference.

"Oh my, that girl is called Fear-chan, isn't she? It's amazing that she's already become part of the children's group in such short time, isn't she quite talented in this area? It really helps us a lot."

"No no, I think she's simply doing what she wants, that's all."

"Indeed. Rather than a talent, I would consider her ability to get along well with kids largely stems from the fact that their mental ages are alike."

"Haha. But being able to approach anyone boldly is one of Fear-kun's strengths."

While the middle-aged shopkeeper was chatting with Konaha and the rest...

"Uwah! Ouch, it really hurts..."

"Ah—! Old mister Hatanaka really had a great fall!"

Seeing the children in a clamor, Haruaki's group looked over to see that the elderly man, Hatanaka-san, lying fallen on the snowy ground. He did not seem able to stand up, groaning in pain. The middle-aged shopkeeper hurried over to him.

"Hatanaka-san, what happened? Are you okay?"

"Oh, hmm... S-Sorry. My back..."

"That's why I asked you not to force yourself too much..."

Seeing Hatanaka-san in that state, the middle-aged shopkeeper shook his head slightly then carefully picked up Hatanaka-san piggyback style before casting a worried glance towards Haruaki's group:

"I'm really sorry but I'll have to send Hatanaka-san to the hospital first. He simply hurt his back from the fall, so I don't think it's anything serious, probably. So, as for the children—"

Pausing at this point, the shopkeeper suddenly displayed a thoughtful look with wavering eyes. He first glanced at the children behind him then looked at Haruaki's group.



"Umm, if you guys don't mind, could you help me watch these kids for now? It'd be such a shame for them if their gathering today in this rare snow had to be dismissed early because of this little accident. I'll hurry back as quickly as possible. All you need to do is take care that they don't do anything dangerous."

"I see... Uh, what are we going to do?"

Haruaki looked back to ask for the group's opinion. Fear nodded vigorously, the first to answer:

"Of course I don't mind. This counts as helping others and it's doing beneficial things for people. I don't have any problems with the request. Taking care of children is a piece of cake!"

"After all, our plans only consisted of playing for the next while~ If that's the case, all we have are extra guests when playing, right? I don't think it's a problem at all~"

Not only Kuroe but also Konoha and Kirika had no objections. In that case, Haruaki had no reason to refuse.

"Do you all agree? Wow, that's a really great help, thank you all!"

"I-I'm so sorry... My back is no good. That's what being old is like... Ouch."

"Please stay still, I'll send you to the hospital to see a doctor right away. Okay, sorry for the trouble, guys, I'm depending on you for the next bit."

The shopkeeper raised a single hand to express his thanks then walked out of the park, trudging through the snow. Although it was an unexpected development, now that they had been tasked with a responsibility, it was necessary to fulfill their duties in earnest.

"Uh, then what should we do first?"

"Hmm, if anything happens, it'll be too much of a pain to go yelling 'kids over there.' Rather, since everyone is a kid, there's no way of distinguishing them."

"Because you're a kid as well."

"Cow Tits, you're making too much noise. So first of all, let's have self-introductions. I'll start. My name is—"

With inexorable arrogance, Fear puffed out her chest and introduced herself. The rest of Haruaki's group also introduced themselves briefly, followed by the children. Since the children were yelling their names at the same time without any particular order, it took a fair amount of time and effort before their names could be learnt. Hence, after asking everyone's name—No, there was still one child whose name was still unknown. Namely, the girl who had been playing by herself all this time.

The girl was sporting a bob cut with a knitted cap. Kneeling on the ground with her feet outwards, calves against her thighs, she was using a small pink shovel to dig up snow, gathering it in front of her to build a small hill. Then—

She stabbed the pink shovel into the hill's center, causing it to collapse.

Repeating ad infinitum.

Neither talking to anyone nor making eye contact with anyone, she simply kept doing the same thing silently.

"Muumuu, that kid's been doing this all along, right?"

Fear cocked her head with an expression of deep thought. On the other hand, the children exchanged glances among themselves with embarrassed looks. Was there some kind of hidden story?

"Anyway, I have to ask for her name at least. I'm heading over!"

Fear ran over to the girl, then bent down slightly to say a few words to her. Then the girl shook her head lightly. Fear cocked her head in puzzlement but after persevering and saying more, Fear apparently forced the girl to relent and put down her shovel. Hence, Fear took her hand with a smile and had her stand up. Although it was achieved through a slightly forceful attitude, Fear did succeed in bringing the girl back...

"..."

However, the girl's expression and temperament definitely could not be described as cheerful. Head bowed slightly, her gaze was cast at her feet. Through her eyes, Haruaki could experience a sense of emptiness that should not belong to children, as though abandoning everything, feeling disappointment with everything in the world.

"So this is what we're doing, it's self-introduction time. Why don't you tell us your name?"

After a long time, the group finally heard a soft whisper.

"...Kadokura... Youko..."

She was speaking in a voice that was easily to miss if one did not perk up their ears to listen carefully.

After saying that, the girl turned around directly and returned to where she had been spending her time. Sitting down at once, she picked up the small pink shovel, then once again, she resumed piling snow up to make a mountain.

Fear simply stared at her back, probably thinking it would be forcing the girl too much if she chatted with her and dragged her over again. With sighing whisper, Fear said:

"Hmm... Youko huh...?"

"Kurako. Call her Kurako."

"Huh?"

Haruaki turned to look at the sudden voice beside him, only to find a boy standing there. The boy had a shaved head and looked quite mischievous. Haruaki recalled the name he had heard during self-introductions... The boy's name seemed to be Kouta.

"Kouta, you know her?"

Hearing Fear's question, the boy crossed his arms and kept a stiff poker face as though trying to act older than his age. Then with a "can't be helped" kind of vibe, he replied:

"That girl's name is Kadokura Youko, or in other words, Youko with the naturally gloomy personality, that's why we call her Kurako.^[4] Everyone calls her that."

"What a disagreeable nickname. First of all, I would suggest that it'd be best if you guys came up with a different nickname... But let's put that aside. In other words, everyone came up with this unpleasant nickname because she's always acting like this?"

Kouta nodded simply after Kirika finished.

"Yeah, she's always like that. She doesn't talk much in class, her personality is gloomy. No one knows what she's thinking about."

"Oh, so that implies that you're classmates with her, Kouta-kun?"

Hearing Konoha's question, Kouta froze for an instant before puffing out his chest immediately as a distraction and continuing:

"Hmm... I guess. Totally by chance. So, umm... Classmates have tried inviting her out to play many times, but she always ignores them. I only brought her here today because my mom said I should, being neighbors and all. In the end, all she's doing is gathering snow like that, making small hills then destroying them, I totally don't get her..."

"I see, so she lives next to your house?"

"Th-That has nothing to do with anything. Totally by chance, okay? Anyway, Kurako always acts like that! So it's best that you don't concern yourselves with her! Like me, I'm totally leaving her alone right now!"

Saying that, Kouta kept throwing glances at Youko. Completely opposite to what he was saying, he clearly looked quite concerned. And extremely concerned at that.

Haruaki's group exchanged looks among themselves. Although they could get a vague feeling for Youko and Kouta's relationship...

"So, what to do?"

"There no 'what to do?' right... It doesn't sit well with me to leave her all lonesome to play by herself. I really hope she can join a circle of friends."

"But it's not like we can force her. Even if we drag her over here forcibly, I believe it would be pointless if she still doesn't feel happy."

"Konoha-kun makes a fair point. So, what should we do...?"

While the group was pondering this question, the self-introductions concluded. Impatient of waiting, the kids finally reached their limit, rushing up to surround them. Naturally, Kouta was among them.

"Like I said, forget about her! The important thing is for us to play now!"

"Yeah, lady, let's play together!"

"What shiny hair! Can I touch your hair?"

"Nwah, hey! Hold on, slow down, calm it—! Argh, there's no calming down at all! Sure, you can touch my hair, hwah, but don't pull it, ouch ouch...! W-What should I do!?"

"No helping it... Anyway, let's all play together for now? Then at the same time, keep an eye on that child's movements."

"I guess it's okay to leave things like that for now. And we can't leave this group of kids unattended either. Besides, perhaps the girl might change her mind after seeing everyone playing happily together..."

Although it was a very passive choice, that was all they could do for now. "Since it's decided—" As a result, Fear picked up two handfuls of snow in an exaggerated manner then said in a joking tone of voice:

"You~ guys~ I can't believe you're so naughty, it's punishment time!"

"Kyah~ kyah~ Ahahaha!"

"Hey, stand still, not allowed to run away—!"

"She clearly went through a snowball fight at home already, but she's really energetic... Pwah!"

"Hehe, don't lower your guard, mister!"

As a result, the situation naturally turned into a game akin to a snowball fight. Without any rules, they were simply throwing snowballs casually at one another. Because snow was hard to come by to begin with, this alone was enough to allow everyone to play so happily—That was what Haruaki thought.

However, just as he bent down to make a new snowball, he turned his gaze at the same time.

There was no change in Youko's state despite the start of a rowdy snowball fight. She was not even glancing over at them. Sitting knees together, shins slanting gently outwards, she was using her shovel to gather snow to make a round hill, then after reaching a certain size, she collapsed it. Then she began to gather snow again—It was an incomprehensible game of solitaire that even went as far as to give an impression of asceticism.

"Take this!"

Haruaki felt a light attack against the back of his head. The other person had simply thrown a sloppy, powdery snowball at him without compacting it hard first. Catching the sight of swaying silver hair in the corner of his eye, Haruaki understood that the culprit was standing right next to him, watching the same scene.

"She's not even looking over here... What should we do? Hey Haruaki, why don't you fulfill your role as the shameless brat and throw a snowball at her or stuff snow down her clothes? She could very well join us, spurred by anger to get even."

"I don't think it's that simple. By the way, that would totally make me a villain!"

"Yeah, even if the plan succeeded, you would still have committed shameless acts against a grade schooler for sure. I will take responsibility by calling the police, so don't worry."

Just at this moment, a shout was suddenly heard.

"Hyah——!"

"Ohoh. Hohoho, too naive."

Fear ducked lightly to evade the flying snowball. Haruaki looked ahead to see Kouta going "Tsk~" and pouting. He immediately seemed to notice where Haruaki and Fear had been staring, saying:

"You guys are looking at Kurako again, huh? Like I said, just leave her alone."

"That's not gonna fly. This kind of game is only fun if everyone plays together... But anyway, she's always acted like this from a long time ago?"

"Uh~..."

Hearing Fear's question, Kouta stammered, looking like he had difficulty answering. Then scratching his shaved head, he replied:

"No... It only started last year. She wasn't like this before. Although she wasn't that cheery and lively to begin with, at least compared to now, she talked more often. I've also seen her go out and play with other girls who were her friends..."

"It started last year huh... Then do you have any idea what's the reason?"

After Haruaki asked, Kouta nodded: "Because we're neighbors, after all."
Then lowering his voice, he said—

"Her dad passed away."

"...!"

"Her dad was a nice guy. He played catch with me every now and then and I've seen him playing with her before, but—"

"I'm so sorry. I understand now. Thank you."

Haruaki interrupted gently and Kouta stopped talking, lowering his eyelids quietly.

Haruaki reviewed all the obtained information in his mind once more. Youko had started turning gloomy last year and gone reticent. Also, her father had passed away. The father who had been quite close to her—

"This situation is quite common... But it's really heartbreaking. In other words, she still hasn't recovered from the blow of her father's passing, right?"

"...Probably."

Haruaki and Fear looked towards Youko again. Without making contact with anyone, the girl simply played with the white snow all by herself.

By the time he noticed, Haruaki found Kouta also staring at Youko's back silently, using those eyes that had very likely started gazing at her from a very long time ago.

Fear murmured softly.

"Clearly there's someone who's been watching you all along... That's such a shame..."

Probably murmuring to herself, Fear nodded vigorously once.

"Hey Haruaki."

By this point, Haruaki already knew what Fear intended to say. But still, he asked her in turn:

"What's up?"

"I-I still wanna help her. I don't know if it'll work or not, but I can't leave her alone. I wish... she could play with everyone and talk more, smile more. But maybe this is just my willful and overconfident wish."

"...Not at all. I feel the same as you too."

Haruaki smiled while he spoke. "Really?" Fear nodded, slightly relieved and said:

"Then we have to think up a plan seriously! What should we do to help her join in the fun? Fufufufu, I'm not gonna hold back at all~"

Fear crossed her arms and puffed out her chest. But after hearing her dangerous announcement, Haruaki was not the one to raise objections.

"However, I would still ask that you show restraint in your course of action. You can't go throwing snowballs at her deliberately to rile her up."

"Indeed, that could very well worsen the gap between relationships. I have to say it'd be absolutely ridiculous."

"Hmm... A way to make her take initiative to play together... I guess we have to make her get interested in us? So, how can we do that?"

At some point, Konoha, Kirika and Kuroe had also gathered by their side. Probably having heard what Kouta had said, they seemed to understand the current topic of conversation for the most part.

—Originally starting out as a target to strive for, it was now a clear and concrete goal.

They hoped that Youko could play with everyone.

Since such a simple wish was already born, all that remained was putting in actual action. The members Haruaki's group exchanged glances to confirm one another's resolve.

On the other hand, Kouta, who was supposed to be closest with Youko, simply threw out a comment with a face full of indifference:

"I suggest you guys give up... It'll end up a total waste of effort."

Then he walked over to his other friends.

"Take this——!"

"You're not going to succeed——!"

While sprinting, Fear and Konoha shot white bullets at each other. Then as though drawn in by some force, they stopped running in parallel and closed in on each other. Meanwhile, the two girls did not halt in their attacks, running past each other as bullets grazed each other's body. In the next instant, the two girls turned around, using their heels to control their momentum and brake all of a sudden. Purely in terms of physical skill, Konoha held the advantage. She was also the first to absorb her momentum and spring into action. Konoha unleashed a preemptive shot towards Fear who had yet to recover her balance. Nevertheless, Fear jumped sideways in desperation, rolling forward while firing three shots of white bullets simultaneously like a ninja counterattacking by throwing shurikens. The children watched in awestruck amazement at the series of spectacular battles, applauding and cheering in excitement.

But as though dismissing Fear's tactics of desperation as impossible to hit her, Konoha jumped up. Using the side of a set of monkey bars as stairs, she tilted herself and ran upwards, firing another shot along the way. While rolling forwards, Fear extended both hands, relying on split-second decision making to grab a horizontal bar that she was just about to pass under, spinning herself once around the bar to avoid Konoha's attack.

For an instant, the two girls looked each other in the eye, face to face.

"This will end everything!"

"Exactly what I wanted to say——!"

Konoha kicked at the monkey bars all at once, jumping high into the air. On the other hand, while using her angular momentum, Fear released the metal bar and slid over the ground with knees bent in a customary manner.

—From the air, Konoha rained down heavy artillery like thunder from heaven's wrath.

—Like a dual-wielding gunman from an action film, Fear slid on her knees for a long distance, leaning her body back while creating countless ammunition in both hands and firing randomly above.

One figure flew through the air while the other glided over the ground.

Both of them exuded steaming murderous intent while exchanging their relative positions of up and down.

Only for an instant, only for that very instant, time almost seemed as though it had stopped—

Konoha then landed, her eyes staring intently at the enemy from behind her glasses. Using the energy in her jump, she slid backwards on the ground while kneeling on one knee. As though break dancing, Fear used both legs to alter her body's direction, meanwhile noting the enemy's lingering vector while distancing herself. Lifting one knee to enter the same pose, she stared at Konoha.

Then they both clicked their tongues simultaneously.

"Tsk, you dodged it?"

"I originally intended to deliver a fatal blow, but it failed, I see..."

Instantly, silence shrouded their surroundings.

A beat later, having borne witness to the duo's spectacular snow battle that resembled an action movie, the children cheered thunderously.

Haruaki held his breath while watching the snowball fight executed in the style of hard-boiled action, feeling his heart race while clenching his fist tightly.

...This'll work. This'll surely work!

Carrying this certainty, he turned his gaze hopefully.

However, the girl in front, the girl whom they were giving their all, trying to stimulate her interest—

"She's not watching at all—!"

Completely ignored.

Youko still had her back against the group, using her shovel to pat the hill she had made by collecting snow. How could she possibly ignore the scene just now? She should be glancing a bit at least? Even Haruaki himself felt very excited after watching the spectacular and superhuman snowball fight that was filled with heart-thumping action. But in spite of that, how could she pull her gaze back so directly, uninterested?

"Hmm~ I can't believe she's ignoring this battle completely, it's really scary. And here I go, thinking this was a great plan."

"Absolutely ridiculous... Even putting on such a grand show, it's still useless? Instead, we ended up putting Fear-kun and Konoha-kun in a difficult situation."

Hearing Kirika, Haruaki turned his gaze to find Fear and Konoha surrounded and blockaded by excited children with glimmering eyes. "What was that just now? So amazing! How did you do it!? Teach us, teach us!" The passion was no less than a handshaking event at a hero show... This was probably the drawback of showing off their real skills. The two girls looked like they were not going to regain their freedom for a while.

(So this plan failed too...?)

Haruaki sighed quietly. Piquing the girl's interest using a snowball fight that resembled a real action movie—They were thinking this would work, but it ended up as wasted effort.

As of now, they had already carried out several plans. First was the snow bunny plan led by Konoha, which involved teaching the children how to make snow bunnies, thereby getting the girl to join in their fun. Holding a cute snow bunny, Konoha ran over in front of Youko, saying "Knock knock, this bunny really wants a partner~" as though performing a puppet show. But after receiving a cold reception, Konoha had no choice but to return listlessly. Tragic was the only word one could use to describe Konoha at the time.

In an attempt to rouse Youko's interest, Kirika also taught the children to make snow angels. This was a foreign game where people would lie face up on the snow then move their outstretched arms up and down and legs from side to side—Resulting in a design left on the snow that resembled angels with outspread wings. Naturally, the girl ignored this utterly as well.

Haruaki also tried using a sled that one of the kids had brought, sliding on it to approach Youko, or playing hide-and-seek which had nothing to do with the snow—But none of it worked. Hence, after some preparations, the group had carried out the action movie snowball fight just now. Normally, these actions might expose their superhuman existences to others, but since only children were present, they could probably manage by sweeping things under the rug. That was why they mustered their determination to carry out this less-than-ideal plan.

However, if even this plan failed as well—What could they do now?

Just at this moment, while watching Fear and Konoha encircled by the children, Kuroe nodded once forcefully:

"Hmm... Then it's my turn this time. It's finally the time to debut the secret move I've been saving up all time, just in case. Haru, Kiririn, can you two help me a bit?"

"Really? To be honest, I'm a little worried, but by this point, I'm willing to try anything."

"Of course I'll help. Then what should we do?"

"Your task is simple. I want you two to..."

It really was simple. Although Kuroe had not told them the point of all this, surely she must have some kind of ingenious plan.

The trio quickly put the plan into motion.

Kuroe approached Youko with extremely natural speed. While taking care not to hit Youko with stray projectiles, Haruaki and Kirika threw snowballs at Kuroe. While dodging as appropriate, Kuroe closed further in on Youko.

Then timing things just right—

After deliberately letting Haruaki and Kirika's snowballs strike her, Kuroe spun herself in an exaggerated manner and collapsed next to Youko.

(That's way too obvious!)

Haruaki trembled in fear but this was also part of Kuroe's plan. Probably.

"..."

Still building the mound of snow, patting it with the back of her shovel, Youko looked at Kuroe. Even though her eyes were indifferent as though saying that she was only taking a glance at a walking ant, Kuroe did not mind and proceeded to say:

"W-Who's there...? My eyes... cannot... see anymore. Oh, this can't be helped. Although it'll saddle you with a destiny filled with trials and tribulations... I'm leaving it to you. Please accept this legendary weapon, the one that I've prepared in case of emergencies, don't let it fall into the hands of demons..."

While speaking as though acting out a part, Kuroe took out something from under her clothing—Something extremely bright and colorful, resembling a water gun. As though her life had reached its end, she handed the object over to Youko, her hands trembling incessantly.

"...?"

It was handed over successfully. Probably because Kuroe's words and behavior were too sudden and inexplicably, it looked like Youko had no choice but to accept the object resembling a water gun. Frowning in puzzlement, she finally spoke up again in a quiet voice.

"What is... this...?"

She was curious! Great chance! Kuroe's eyes flashed.

"This is called a snowball gun. It's a toy for firing snowballs in place of a water gun. I'm so glad I bought it specially from the internet, thinking this day would finally arrive. As for how to use it, just press here and here..."

Kuroe sat up suddenly, then after teaching Youko roughly how to use it, she dutifully screamed "gah~" and collapsed once more.

"Then that's it. Please avenge me, hero, I'm counting on you... Gack."

"..."

Looking down with eyes completely devoid of emotional fluctuation, Youko stayed silent for a long while. Kuroe continued to play a corpse's part. Haruaki and the others gulped while observing Youko's reaction.

Then—

(...Ohoh!)

Originally kneeling with knees together, feet slanting outwards, Youko slowly stood up.

Then she walked over to Haruaki's group, step by step. Undoubtedly, she was walking towards them.

"No way..." Haruaki could hear Kouta muttering quietly in surprise. He could also see Kuroe remaining sprawled on the ground, making a forceful thumbs up gesture.

Who could have thought that she would join in their games for this kind of reason—

Just as this thought crossed Haruaki's mind...

Youko stopped walking. In front of her was Kouta.

"Eh...?"

"Tell them..."

Youko presented the snowball gun to Kouta. With those eyes, completely unchanged all this time, unmoved by everything, showing an expression of gloom, she said:

"Tell them what...?"

"Tell these people..."

Then Youko forcefully shoved the snowball gun into Kouta's hand.

She threw Haruaki's group a glance.

Looking very unhappy for real, she said—

"...Stop getting in my way."

Clear rejection.

Far surpassing the indifference she had expressed to this point—Rejection.

The snowball gun remained in Kouta's hand. Haruaki could only groan. Youko then turned around, but did not return to where Kuroe had fallen. Instead, she changed her site and continued to gather snow, making a small hill, smoothing out the surface, then stabbing her shovel to collapse it—

Haruaki could only watch the scene silently. During this time, Kuroe rolled back over to them while maintaining her posture like a dead fish. Then getting up while patting off the snow all over her clothes, she cast her blank eyes towards Youko and murmured:

"What a miscalculation. I never thought she'd be indifferent to this extent."

"Hmm. Don't get in her way huh... From her perspective, perhaps our invitations to play together is a kind of harassment... I really have no idea if this counts as something absolutely ridiculous."

Haruaki turned to see Fear and Konoha also staring at Youko's back, at a loss what to do. Half of the children were still hassling Fear and Konoha while the other half, surprised that Youko had stood up, were looking at her like Fear and Konoha.

Only one person. Only Kouta, whom Youko had spoken with directly, was frowning with a furrowed brow, narrowing his eyes forcefully, glaring at the snowball gun he had received.

"...Damn it. This is no joke, idiot..."

Just as Haruaki heard Kouta's suppressed and quiet mutters—

Kouta suddenly shoved snow randomly into the gun and made a pose.

"I don't care anymore! You big idiot—! Take this and that—!"

Then in resignation, he randomly shot snowballs in all directions without caring about anything. Simply by holding down the trigger, the muzzle went "Bang bang bang bang!" and shot snowballs with alarming speed.

"Nwah! Hold it, that's too cheating of you! If you're a man, do it fair and square... Wap!?"

"Kou-chan, you're amazing!"

"Shut up!"

"Everyone, let's gang up to defeat Kou-niichan!"

"Yeah—!"

The scene instantly turned chaotic. While dodging snowballs, Kuroe whispered as though she had nothing to do with it: "Oh crap, the legendary weapon has fallen into a demon's hands! Can the heroes of light save the world!?"

However, despite the lively and rowdy surroundings, Haruaki's heart was filled with bitterness.

—Failing to save the world did not matter. Clearly what they did not want to see was loneliness on that child's face. Perhaps it would be presumptuous to call it saving her, but they were just trying to help her.

Was everything they did simply unwarranted meddling?

Hoping she could laugh openly together with everyone, were they being presumptuous—?

Due to pondering these questions, naturally, Haruaki did not succeed in dodging the snowball that Kouta had fired towards his face.

Part 7

The sun was about to set.

As the setting sun's rays illuminated the interior of the park, there were almost no children left.

Not long earlier, the shopkeeper had returned after taking Hatanaka-san to the hospital, prompting the children to disperse. After thanking Haruaki's group profusely for playing with the children all this time, the shopkeeper left with the children who were too young to go home on their own.

Hence, there was almost no signs of children in the park currently.

Conversely, two people remained.

"..."

That girl was still present.

Bathed under the orange glow of the setting sun, Youko was randomly gathering snow to make a small hill. But soon after, she stabbed her shovel into the hill, causing it to collapse. Without making eye contact with anyone, nor conversing with anyone, neither did she laugh with anyone, she simply repeated these actions.

An endless, solitary and lonesome game of solitaire.

Kouta was watching the scene silently. As though watching over her was his duty, he kept staring intently. After all, the two of them were neighbors and his parents had probably reminded him to walk Youko home together. However, he did not know when he should speak up. Neither did he know if he ought to speak up—That was what it looked like.

Haruaki's group also had no choice but to watch her.

"In the end... All she's doing is that the whole time."

Fear said lightly.

"Clearly she doesn't seem to be enjoying it, but why is she repeating it nonstop? Sigh, I haven't even asked her about this matter... How should I say it...? It's really such a shame."

Haruaki continued to keep his gaze on her while he spoke. What meaning was there behind her game? They still could not figure it out, even now. Compared to a happy snowball fight, compared to making snow bunnies, Youko preferred doing that?

(...Hmm?)

She preferred doing that?

Under the setting sun, the view of the young girl's petite back could be seen amidst this scene. Something suddenly flashed across Haruaki's mind. Oh right, lemme think again carefully. What was with that game of hers?

First she sat on the ground. Then gathering snow with her shovel, building up to a certain point, she then patted its surface to make it round and smooth. After examining it for a while, she stabbed her shovel into the side of the hill, causing it to collapse—This was repeated endlessly.

Without finding it tiresome at all, she kept repeating the same behavior.

Almost—It was almost like she was saying that this must be done.

Up until now, Haruaki was thinking that it was only a game to relieve boredom. A meaningless act of protestation that expressed "I don't want to play in a snowball fight."

But was that really true?

Was it really destructive behavior purely for killing time without particular meaning?

(Stop getting in my way.)

These words were only used when purposeful behavior was obstructed, right—?

"Haruaki-kun? What's the matter?"

"Hold on, wait. I think I'm on to something... You girls should think about it too."

Haruaki told Konoha and the girls about his doubts. Their expressions changed instantly.

"Indeed... How very odd. Although it's absolutely ridiculous, I totally didn't notice."

"Yeah, taking a closer look, it really is the same action, repeated identically. No, not completely identical, I guess. There might be clues in what's the same and what's different..."

The group focused on Youko's movements.

Gathering snow, forming a small hill, smoothing it with the shovel. Just as Kuroe pointed out, there really were minute differences. This time, Youko even used her gloved hand and arm to flatten the surface. Once it became round, only then did she pick up her shovel and stab it into the side of the mound of snow, collapsing it—

"...Is she really 'collapsing' the mound of snow?"

"What do you mean by that, Fear?"

Arms crossed, watching Youko with serious eyes, Fear proceeded to say:

"Just now, she deliberately picked up the shovel from the side, then stabbed it into the mound of snow. That's what she's been doing all along. If all she wants to do is destroy the mound, couldn't she just kick randomly with her foot, for example? But she didn't do that. Always using a shovel—and going from the side, moving towards the same spot. Is there some meaning behind that? In other words, she's not trying to destroy the mound, for example—"

Fear cocked her silver-haired head and continued:

"The impression I get is, that's right—She looks like she's trying to dig a hole in the middle, right?"

"Dig a hole...?"

The speaker was not Haruaki but someone standing next to their group, watching Youko in a trance. Then he looked at the mound of snow in front

of Youko with surprise, also widening his eyes as though he had discovered something.

"Hey Kouta, did you actually think of something?"

"Ah, uh, no..."

"Kouta-san, could you please tell us?"

After Konoha asked gently, Kouta hesitated for quite a while. Finally, he started speaking in resignation:

"Her dad... seems to be from the north. So they used to go to the north on trips as a family, skiing or snowboarding. Maybe they took the opportunity to visit his hometown as well? I don't really know."

"Hmm."

"Also... I've been in her room before and saw a photo that she's decorated like she really cherishes it. She even put it in a photo frame and placed it on the most obvious spot on her desk. I think she really loves the photo."

"What kind of photo is it? Does it have anything to do with her behavior?"

Hearing Fear's question, Kouta bit his lip hard and bowed his head, then said:

"—A photo of a snowhouse. Along with auntie and uncle when he was still alive, the three of them together... Squeezed together in a snowhouse with happy looks on their faces, everyone making victory signs with their hands at the same time."

Part 8

The scene visible so far. The scene still visible currently.

But now, these scenes carried a different significance, rendered completely revised before Haruaki's eyes.

Gathering snow, piling it into a mound, flattening its surface to make it round. Inserting the shovel sideways to hollow out the center. But resulting in failure, the collapse of the mound... Hence, the process was repeated all over again.

Yes, observing after thinking over things this way, it did become all clear now.

She had wanted to do this all along. Because it snowed, she remembered.

All alone, using her own method—She was attempting to make a snowhouse.

Apart from her, the space was deserted. A desolate space with nothing but white snow, shaded red by the setting sun.

Over there, all one could hear was the sound of the girl entrusting certain thoughts to the white snow.

Shoveling, patting, shoveling...

As for what those thoughts were, naturally, Haruaki could not understand just by watching her from the side. Perhaps she was simply reminiscing about the past. Maybe she had made a wish impossible to realize, wanting to return to a certain instant in the past. Or perhaps it was something even more complicated, more profound, impossible to comprehend casually.

The only thing that could be understood was—This was precisely her wish.

With this rare snow, it was anyone's guess when snow would fall again. On a rare day like this, rather than having fun, rather than having joy and laughter, she singlemindedly prioritized a challenge more than anything else—her wish.

"Hey Haruaki, I've thought of a plan that might succeed in making her smile."

"What a coincidence, me too."

Fear was standing next to Haruaki, narrowing her eyes as though looking at something bright, gazing at the girl's petite back. It was true that the setting sun's rays was a bit dazzling, reflecting off the white snow, but surely that was not the only reason.

Not only Fear and Haruaki but as one would expect, everyone was also looking at the girl.

Not a lonely game of solitaire—

This scene was filled with a sincere and ascetic wish.

Hence, everyone knew what they had to discuss, of course.

"But is it possible to make? There seems to be a number of problems that need to be resolved."

"Yeah. First is the amount of snow. The snow has stopped falling for quite a long while now... Just as everyone can see, the remaining snow is almost about to melt away. However, certain places should still have some accumulated snow."

"Yeah, I agree that a large amount of snow seems to be needed... Youko-chan apparently wants to make a miniature snowhouse, but given this rare chance, I hope we can make a full size one."

"I've got a basic question. How are snowhouses made, anyway? Youko-chan has already repeated attempts to make miniature snowhouses without succeeding... I'm thinking her method might be wrong, or there might be more reliable and feasible ways, right?"

When Haruaki finished speaking, Kirika rested her chin on her hand in deep thought.

"Yes... Although it's an absolutely ridiculous notion, it's possible that she's more clumsy than average... But even if that were true, she's repeated the challenge so many times already. It might have something to do with the snow texture. As for method huh...? Let me check on the internet first."

"We're counting on you, Kiririn~"

Kirika operated her cellphone and began to gather information. Soon after, she looked up with a slight frown.

"Reportedly, the reliable method is... Make a mound of snow first, pour water over it. After leaving it overnight to freeze, just hollow it out the next morning. Indeed, by using this method, the texture of the snow becomes irrelevant and ordinary people can make it, apparently."

"Perhaps it's doable in places with greater snowfall, but our current snow is about to melt away. After leaving it overnight, it's going to melt completely, right?"

"In the end, this method is difficult to use too..."

There were countless issues. Snow volume, snow texture, even if they wanted to use the technique of freezing overnight, there was still the issue of air temperature.

They had finally found out Youko's wish after so much trouble.

Despite finding the method capable of making her smile, making her happy...

They were unable to make it work?

Ultimately, they were powerless...?

Haruaki's group fell silent. Time ticked away as they watched Youko from behind without saying anything. The shadows cast by the setting sun gradually grew dark and long. The pristine, white snow slowly turned into pitch-black silhouettes.

Once the sun set completely, turning into night...

The day would end. The girl would probably go home. Even if she did not, she must be made to go home.

This incomparably precious day when snow had fallen—wasted entirely on a wish impossible to realize. That would be way too depressing, Haruaki thought. No matter how insignificant, he really wanted to create some memories for Youko before she went home, allowing her to smile when reminiscing this day some time in the future. Otherwise, it would be too tragic.

Just at this moment—

"Hmm... Hold on."

Still using her cellphone to do research, Kirika suddenly stopped her fingers and called to everyone.

"Class Rep, have you found something?"

"Yes. This method might work... Though there are still problems to overcome. But if we can resolve them, it'll be fine."

Hence, everyone leaned forward to look at Kirika's cellphone while she gave a simple explanation.

An Inuit-style snowhouse. More accurately, it was how to construct the building known as the igloo.

First, numerous blocks of snow were cut out and then stacked together in a hemispherical shape to form a snowhouse. The method was completely different from Youko's way of making a pile of snow then hollowing out its center.

There was only one problem with this method, namely, blocks of snow needed to be prepared. The Inuits would cut blocks of snow from the snow underfoot resembling glaciers, but this would be too hard for Haruaki's group. The issues of snow volume and texture still remained. Even if they gathered snow, stuffing it into a mold to make blocks of snow, the fallen snow would still continue to melt during this time. Even though Kirika had discovered this method, the difficulty was still a bit too high... Just as Haruaki was thinking that—

"Blocks of snow...?"

Fear seemed to realize something as she suddenly looked up.

"What's the matter? Perhaps you've come up with a way to make blocks of snow?"

"Yeah, I did. That's right."

"Really!?"

"However—there's a problem too. A very personal problem and a matter of feelings."

"A matter of feelings...?"

Just as Haruaki wanted to pursue the issue further, he suddenly stopped talking.

Fear had turned her face away from him, narrowing her eyes to focus on the view of Youko's back. The sorrow evoked was identical to what Haruaki had seen numerous times so far.

—This was Fear's expression whenever she recalled her own past.

"I want to make that child smile, make her happy, and make wonderful memories for her to recall. But to do that, I need to use my contemptible

past self... This feels very contradictory to me. That's why I was thinking, is this actually okay...?"

Fear watched Youko silently, at a loss, her eyes unblinking.

By the time she realized, Haruaki had already extended his hand towards her silver-haired head.

"...It's all in the past. You're no longer your past self. You know that very clearly, right?"

"Yeah—You're... right."

What exactly was it that had gently melted Fear's confusion as though it were snow?

If Haruaki were feeling conceited, he would probably say it was his hand's warmth. Perhaps by watching over and protecting Youko's back, Fear had discovered the warmth of certain feelings within her own heart.

"In the past, my mechanisms have taken people's lives. If I can make use of them now to bring smiles to a certain person, then duty compels me to do it. Although I've no idea if it's acceptable, at least I believe it's better than doing nothing, so I'll extend a helping hand. This is what I've been doing all along and will continue to do... There's no need to hesitate."

Fear suddenly relaxed her tense cheeks and shoulders, revealing a smile.

Then immediately, it was perfectly clear what she was looking at, what they were all looking at.

The group continued to watch Youko—as well as the side of his face while he was clearly listening to their conversation all this time.

Facing forward, Kouta spoke up again after a long while.

"—You guys... have a way?"

A gruff tone of voice, yet it could not conceal the feelings behind them.

Fear smiled again. After taking a glance at the side of Kouta's face, she looked out towards Youko in the distance again. Then smiling, she murmured as though asking the petite figure:

"Clearly there's someone watching you all along... Isn't it a shame for you to be staying in that kind of place? You're not locked away in darkness

where no one can see you. Neither are you a cursed, useless object, abandoned, submerged in oblivion, deserving of abandonment—People still need you. So come out. If these hands of mine can help, I will gladly offer them to you any time..."

"Lady, what are you talking about?"

"Fufu... I'm just murmuring to myself. Don't mind it."

Fear turned to face Kouta instead of Youko. At this moment, Kouta finally looked towards Fear.

"What are you guys planning?"

"Don't worry, just leave everything to us. We will make a snowhouse."

"I don't quite get it but didn't you guys say there are problems?"

Unexpectedly, Kouta had paid quite close attention to their conversation. He now pouted unhappily. In response, Konoha said:

"Fufu... I have already thought of a solution to the issue of snow texture. As for where a lot of accumulated snow still remains, I have some idea already. Since sunlight doesn't quite reach that place, we should be able to make it in time if we hurry over... However, it would be best to use the yard at our home as the actual production site."

The yard at our home, in other words, that place which is very close to it. Haruaki instantly figured it out.

"Oh right, the forest behind our house!"

"Indeed, a lot of fallen snow might remain there."

"Our yard is really a great idea. The pile of snow from our shoveling should still be there. We can also use that snow for minor things like reinforcement."

Kirika and Kuroe also nodded. Hence, the venue was decided. However, Kouta still seemed full of doubt.

"Say, I still don't get it. Before talking about the amount of snow, didn't you guys say that the method is difficult to carry out as well?"

"Kouta, that's simply a problem of having enough resolve or not. But once resolve is committed properly, there's no problem at all. I'm not an ordinary

person, so I'm able to use methods that beyond ordinary people's ability or belief—Fufu, that's all."

"Eh~ Why did things suddenly get so suspicious? What do you mean by not an ordinary person?"

Kouta frowned deeply. In a joking tone of voice, Kuroe answered:

"Nufufu, let me give you three choices. You can pick the answer that you like. Number one, we are actually magical girls and can use magic. Number two, we are superpowered warriors summoned from another world, able to use superpowers at will. Number three—"

"We are cursed tools, obtaining human form as a result of receiving excessive curses, which is why we're able to use the abilities of our original forms—That's all."

Smiling lightly with neither pride nor shame, Fear provided the final option.

Kouta puffed out his cheeks and said:

"Stop playing around with me. That's total nonsense. But the last choice seems the most impossible... Because I've never heard of such a weird backstory. Also, you ladies look more like you're able to use magic or superpowers."

"...Really?"

The smile on Fear's face deepened quietly.

Then in the same manner as how Haruaki did to her, Fear reached out lightly to stroke Kouta's head.

Kouta frowned and said awkwardly:

"Wah! Lady, what are you doing!? I'm not a kid... Oh right, what about me? Is there anything I can help? If you're making a snowhouse at your house, I can go there too! Umm... After all, I've got plenty of free time!"

"Absolutely ridiculous. You should take her home first."

"That's right. It's not like we could let you two wander outside at night, making your parents worry while waiting for you to go home for dinner."

"B-But!"

Kirika and Konoha spoke strictly. Just as Kouta wanted to object, Fear's hand patted the top of his head lightly and rhythmically.

"Kouta, listen to me. I hope you can leave the snowhouse making to us. But of course, you have a great mission too. And it's something only you can accomplish. So I have to count on you... Will you do it?"

"What mission?"

"It's very simple. Once the snowhouse is completed, someone will go find you to lead you to our house. When the time comes, you should take Youko out secretly. After all, since today is our first time meeting her, it'd be difficult to get her to agree to go out."

"...Isn't that what people call wandering outside at night?"

Kouta narrowed his eyes halfway, countering sharply. Fear could not help but tremble then hastily make up an excuse.

"M-Maybe, but that's that, the Cow Tits who just warned you isn't that respectable a person to begin with. Lemme tell you honestly, she's actually a great villain. As long as you ask her for a favor, she'll turn a blind eye and should understand us more or less... Okay, actually we've already reached an agreement, I will bribe her with rice crackers so there's no problem. All we're doing is entertaining the two of you for a while after the snowhouse is done. We'll definitely find someone to protect you while you're walking in the streets at night. So feel free to thank me all you want while carrying out your mission without worry."

"Bribery? Adults sure are dirty~" Kouta grumbled as though he understood worldly matters. On the other hand, Konoha pouted and groaned, inexplicably forced to go with the flow by playing the role of a corrupt bureaucrat.

Part 9

Later on, at the forest behind the Yachi residence...

Unlike Japanese snowhouses, Inuit-style igloos were constructed from blocks of snow. Provided that snow blocks could be made, all they needed to do was stack the blocks alternately in circles, which was much easier and more convenient than Japanese snowhouses.

But of course, therein lay the problem. How to make snow blocks? How could they use the scant remaining snow in the surroundings, slightly melting and softened, to make dozens of snow blocks?

The answer was—

"Mechanism No.10 gripping type, compressing form: «Iron Coffin of Lissa», Curse Calling!"

Transformed from a Rubik's cube, the steel cube made sounds akin to the screams of the dying, grating as the mechanisms compressed while changing its form. Dark-colored steel stood upright in its original location. Simply by staring at it, one would feel oppressed by the overwhelming mass of foreboding violence, a sense of coldness that almost made one freeze.

The cube's transformations finally took on a form similar to omnidirectional suspended ceiling panels. A steel coffin capable of compressing its internal volume vertically and horizontally. Only the front face was opened, waiting for a victim. A gloomy instrument of torture and execution.

"Ohoh, this is one of the thirty-two types of magic wielded by magical girl Fear Red, «Magical☆Death Box♪»... Normally, fragments of stars, glittering from the energy of dreams, are kept inside of it!"

"Hey Kuroe, what are you talking about?"

"Because it's a rare chance, I'm just trying out an explanation for Kouta-kun, using one of our real identities—the magical girl theory—to make up a story."

"Rather than a magical girl, I think 'Fear Red' sounds more like a Power Ranger..."

Whatever, it's Kuroe's creation after all—Haruaki reinvigorated his spirits.

"Anyway, let's try to make the first block of snow. Fear, are you ready?"

"Any time."

Using a shovel, Haruaki scooped up snow from between the trees and threw it into Fear's coffin. After accumulating a certain amount, Fear began to shift the torture tool's outer panels while shrinking the coffin's vertical, horizontal and back faces. This was the mechanism's original

purpose—namely, torture via simple "compression of volume" as well as an action performed during execution.

But currently, it was not harming anyone.

Instead, it was currently existing as something to pray for the birth of the opposite.

Hence—

"Hmm, probably like this."

Fear waved the chain of cubes connected to the iron coffin, causing the steel panels to shift back to their original positions, returning to its initial volume. Then opening the front panel—Inside, the snow that Haruaki had shoveled had been compressed to become a beautiful and straight block of snow.

"Ohoh, well done!"

"Hmph, this actually requires operating more carefully than expected. So this is only possible thanks to my outstanding control. You'd better praise me more!"

"Ficchi, you're so amazing! I'll praise you madly! Head stroke head stroke."

Fear puffed out her chest proudly. Kuroe grinned and stroked Fear's head. As a result, Fear went "hmph" with satisfaction.

"Then let's confirm the next step... Then we're going to move this block of snow to the yard, right? Are we using the pyramid transport method?"

"What's that?"

"Uh, in terms of imagery, it's like putting several logs under the snow blocks, then rolling the blocks on top of them... Something like that. Yeah, that's similar to how they moved moai on Easter Island, right?"

"I don't really know... But I get a basic idea of what you're trying to say. Then we have to prepare tree trunks. Also, it would be best to prevent the snow blocks from bumping into things, so we need to make a transport container first to put on top of the logs. Just like a trolley."

"As expected of Kono-san, the reliable magical girl Konoha Pink! Swiftly making short work out of every kind of problem!"

"You're making me out to be some kind of phantom slasher... But pink? Ehehe, in other words, implying the most feminine, right? In a certain sense, this goes without saying?"

"Eh? No, when speaking of Kono-san, meat is inevitable! So you can say it's the color of fresh slices of raw pork—Cough cough cough. Uh, anyway, let's just say that it's the most suitable color for Kono-san! Explaining it will ruin the mood!"

"...I feel like I've heard a bizarre explanation but anyway, I'll pretend I didn't hear it."

Konoha shrugged forcefully and sighed deeply. At the same time, she began to chop down nearby trees with her bare hands, producing a number of meter-long logs. Then she chopped a particularly stout tree trunk into half and hollowed out its center, creating a container that resembled sliced-open bamboo.

"Then using the path of logs and the container to transport snow blocks to the wall, going over the wall and placing them into the yard, leave this task to magical girl Kuroe White, me! I will play the part of the pure and beautiful young shrine maiden character who bears the powers of the goddess, Her Augustness of the Sleek Black Hair, nice to meet you. With a shake of the hair like this~"

"Then I'll use the «Tragic Black River» to catch the snow blocks and arrange them... Right?"

"Just like her moniker of black, magical girl Kirika Black is the cool strategist type. But actually, only in front of the one she likes, she can't help but manifest her type as a tsundere!"

"K-Kuroe-kun! N-No, I always present myself in a realistic and unbiased manner. There's no capricious attitude in front of a certain person at all..."

Kirika stuttered something, but Haruaki did not quite catch it. In any case, their tasks were thus assigned and divided. A bucket relay method.

The more time they wasted, the more snow would be melted. Hence, everyone decided to start working immediately.

Using a shovel to collect snow, Haruaki tossed it into Fear's torture tool. Fear compressed it with a clang, producing a block of snow. Konoha then moved the snow block onto the container, rolling over the logs to reach

Kuroe who was waiting by the wall. During this time, Haruaki gathered more snow to make the next block—

Due to a lack of time for resting, this was actually quite labor-intensive work. Haruaki could feel his shovel-carrying hand grow heavier and heavier.

However, everyone was serious, devoting themselves to their task.

Fear was nearest to Haruaki, hence he could see her hard work the clearest. Controlling the torture tool probably exhausted her greatly, but she never complained even once. Neither did she wipe the sweat coming from her forehead. She simply did her best to make snow blocks nonstop.

While shoveling, Haruaki said:

"Once the snowhouse is done..."

"...Hmm?"

"I guess we really should bring a candle to put inside for lighting. I think it'll be really good for the mood."

"It's not like I can't understand. Mood huh... Yeah, you're right. After imagining it, I really think the mood will be great. Inside a space surrounded by snow, a candle's flickering flame, then lighting up—"

"Oh right, we should prepare rice crackers and tea. But once the snowhouse is made, as long as the water is boiled while waiting for Kouta-kun and Youko-chan to arrive, there should be enough time..."

"Hey, stop reading my mind! You must be the magical girl who's always kept for the last, Shameless Green. Because your best magic is preparing rice crackers and green tea, your color is green!"

"I'm not a girl, okay? And at least put the name 'Haruaki' somewhere in there!"

While they chatted meaninglessly, they kept working nonstop.

Haruaki's breathing grew more and more rapid. He could also feel his upper arm getting tense and stiff.

Their dialogue gradually lessened as silent periods of working increased.

Even so, they did not find it tiresome. They did not find their work too hard, nor did they feel suffering.

Their hearts carried elation and a sense of mission.

Because they could envision the future product waiting for them, they were able to endure.

Indeed, definitely, absolutely, undoubtedly.

When this snowhouse was finished, waiting in front of them—

Surely capable of blowing away all their fatigue—

Today, on this special day when a rare amount of snow had fallen, turning into an even more special memory, powerfully etched into their minds—

The incomparably beautiful scenery.

Part 10

Clong. A pebble struck the house's window on the second floor.

A young girl peered out to see a boy's stiff and awkward face.

He whispered:

"Get ready to go out, come down."

"..."

Arriving as their guide to call Kouta and Youko, Haruaki was standing slightly further away, watching them.

Kouta was wearing winter clothing from head to toe. Written on his face was nervousness, unease and excitement about sneaking out of home at night. Currently, one could even observe faintly the fear he felt, wondering about the reaction of the girl above whom he was looking at. What if she closed the curtains without saying a word? What if she closed the window firmly? What if she called her mother?

On the other hand, Youko did not say a word, looking downwards to stare at Kouta intently, as though trying to deduce Kouta's intentions.

Kouta gulped.

Sincerely, he racked his brain to the limit.

Then he said words that would motivate her to move.

"...If you wait until tomorrow, it'll melt totally."

Several minutes later—

There was a change in positioning.

Rather than the second floor window and the roadside, the two kids were now facing off, standing in the road. Youko was dressed in a ski jacket with a knitted cap but took forever to move her legs, standing in the same spot in hesitation.

Haruaki remembered. Back when collecting Kouta, Kouta was also very hesitant, muttering to himself: "I've no idea how to bring her over."

Haruaki had given him two suggestions.

Compared to him, Kouta understood Youko better, so Haruaki was giving him free rein. Don't feel too concerned about our suggestions. Just express your own feelings sincerely—That was the first suggestion.

Rather than Haruaki, the other suggestion came from Fear who was waiting at home.

(What if Youko takes forever to move? Hmph, isn't it obvious what needs to be done at times like that?)

In a joking tone of voice, Haruaki had passed along Fear's suggestion.

Hence, Kouta put it into action.

In other words—

(Make a move directly. Provided you believe what you're doing is correct, words are not needed. Use brute force to capture and bring her over!)

Shyly, in an embarrassed manner, Kouta—

Grabbed the girl's hand firmly. Then pulling her, he broke into a run.

Despite showing a look of confusion, Youko still ran in this manner together with Kouta.

Smiling as he watched this scene, Haruaki suddenly recalled his own mission.

"Oh dear, I'm clearly responsible for leading the way. It'll be pointless if they leave me behind."

Haruaki could not help but smile from the heart, watching the two children, awkward yet trying their best. In order to catch up to them, he started to walk as well, stepping on the snow that was about to melt.

Part 11

Despite having no idea what was going on...

But perhaps—carrying a little bit of anticipation, she allowed the power from his hand pulling her to guide her body forward.

Finally, they arrived at an unfamiliar Japanese-style house. An old place that took up a vast area.

Her childhood friend was probably visiting this place for the first time too, looking this way and that while entering the premises. The man from the daytime, leading the way, did not press the doorbell, instead moving through the home directly, walking to a place resembling a garden. Holding her by the hand, he was also taking strides, following the man.

Then right there—Appearing in a corner of the spacious yard—

"Hwah... K-Kouta-kun, this is..."

"Let's go."

His tone was still gruff.

She stared at the white dome's entrance where candlelight flickered.

Applying more force while holding her hand, he spoke rapidly:

"Just as you can see, although it's not very big, but if it's just these ladies here, they still don't have enough people. There'll be a gap if everyone doesn't squeeze to sit inside, making them shiver in cold, so we'll just have to enter and take a seat... Let's go! It can't be helped, we're going in!"

Pulled by him, they stepped forward.

Gradually, they approached the source of the flickering candlelight that was leaking from the entrance.

Bending forward slightly, she looked inside with trepidation—

(Ah...)

The group inside was not the trio of her father, her mother and herself.

As expected, they were the four women she had seen during the daytime—But even so, Youko still thought to herself:

It's so similar to the photo I keep on my desk at home.

Everyone in the igloo was showing a face of happiness.

Despite clearly being surrounded by cold ice, there was a very warm population density here.

Hence, naturally, a certain expression also formed on her own face.

Seeing that, one of the girls nodded once, vigorously, and said:

"Yes, that's a great expression! Now that's more like it!"

Even if you say that—Youko thought to herself.

Because, that person with the head of long, pretty, silver hair...

Was making the happiest face of all those present—

An extremely radiant smile, as though her sincere wish and all wishes had been realized—

Her face really showed absolute bliss while she was eating rice crackers.

Chapter 5 - Art Thou Haruaki? -Imitation of Life-

Part 1

Sakuramairi Shiraho was resting her chin against her hand, elbow on the counter, staring at the man before her.

The shop's interior was dimly lit. Ever since a long time ago, this antique shop was only a decrepit and somber space, even after the death of the owner—in other words, her father—the atmosphere did not change, remaining decrepit and somber. It was also filled with a sense of stagnation and tranquility like a graveyard—apart from the instant when a certain doll struck up conversation with her, the very instant when her life was changed henceforth—this was precisely the everyday state of the shop.

Shiraho temporarily shifted her gaze away from the nondescript middle-aged man and looked at the piece of paper on the counter where he had written words with a trembling hand. It was like the art of acting. In order to get a grasp on the other person's body and mind, judicious variation of force and tension was necessary. The instant when the other party relaxed because she took her gaze off him, she must strike at the opening, deliberately stabbing into the core of his being with ice-cold words:

"—I would like to clarify something first."

"Eeek... C-Clarify what?"

She pulled her gaze back. In contrast to the man who was beginning to show a timid attitude, Shiraho continued to maintain her gaze and the coldness in her voice while she spoke:

"Do note that this shop is not a charity. We are only able to profit from the antiques we purchase after we sell them to other customers who wish to buy them. In other words... Customers who want us to purchase objects with no resale value cannot be considered customers at all in our view. They would be no different from worthless criminals who bring loss instead. In other words, beings who have no right to complain no matter what treatment they receive. Considering this principle, could you please answer this question of mine honestly."

She interspersed silent breaths within her speech. This was also one of the steps in the variation of tension. Then after several seconds, she chose the most effective point in time to break the silence.

"How much money do you expect me to squander in purchasing this—a cursed item... one that could not possibly be sold to other customers?"

"Eeek... Eeek——! S-Sorry, I'm so sorry——!"

Instantly, the man's face turned deathly white as he scrambled and ran out of the antique shop. Luckily, he did not break any utensils or pottery goods when he bumped into shelves.

Peace returned to the shop. After exhaling a large breath, Shiraho turned her gaze lightly towards the object on the counter. Still with her chin against her hand, she frowned slightly with the corners of her lips and grumbled:

"Seeing the way he fled in desperation... It looks like this really is cursed. Right on target with my first guess..."

Of course, Shiraho did not possess the appraisal ability to discern cursed tools. However, she did not possess the ability to appraise other antiques either. What she did was simply sit here to tend to the shop whenever it suited her mood. When customers tried to sell goods to her, she would buy them at suitably cheap costs then put the goods out for sale in the shop with slightly higher sticker prices. Doing it this way, at least the shop was not operated at a loss. She had no intention of earning massive profits in the first place, but was simply trying to add a little productive value to her daily habit of sitting at the shop's counter, breathing in the air filled with the smell of antiques. Rather than forest bathing therapy, this would be antique bathing.

However, regarding business practices undertaken to casually kill time, Shiraho had also established her one and only rule—it must absolutely not cause trouble for her lover. She had to pay extra attention to tools that might threaten their quiet lives. Often times, old cursed tools would invariably end up passing between owners in the form of antiques. Seeing as she was a person who handled antiques, it definitely would not hurt to take extra care.

Hence, whenever Shiraho sensed anything unusual about the seller's attitude or the object in question, she would always elicit answers from the other person in the same manner as just now. And today was the first

clean hit. Shiraho could not help but think to herself that she should continue this practice even though it was not always useful.

Well then—Shiraho looked at the purchasing form on the counter, in other words, what the man had filled out earlier in a clearly furtive and timid manner. Were the name, address and telephone number on the form actually real? Confirming was a piece of cake, but was there any point?

Furthermore—there was something else on the counter.

A large trunk the man had brought. The arms and legs of a folded doll, resembling a wooden mannequin, were visible in the open trunk. Its size was almost like a child's, quite large for a doll, but its structure was quite simple, merely consisting of old-era streamlined body parts strung together. The head was only simply spherical with a slight protrusion at the nose location.

To be honest, Shiraho only felt intuitively that this mannequin-like doll was very suspicious. Since she was always together with another doll who was the most important to her in the world, perhaps her body had memorized something like the scent belonging to extraordinary dolls, then possibly sensing that scent vaguely on this mannequin.

What was this thing? And what kind of cursed tool was it? Because the man fled without saying a word, she had no way of knowing. Nevertheless, Shiraho decided that at the very least, this doll probably had yet to reach self-awareness, or in other words, the ability to take on human form. What she sensed on the doll was ultimately just the scent of an unusual but non-sentient object.

"Whatever. Anyway, since the guy fled and left this here, it means that he is selling it to us for free. In that case, I am free to do with this thing as I please..."

Simply stated, throwing it away or destroying it would be the easiest methods. However, she was unable to do that nonchalantly as soon as she recalled her beloved partner who was likewise a cursed doll as well. Suppose she threw it away—Her lover would say angrily: "If someone picked it up, it might bring them great trouble!" Suppose she destroyed it—Her lover would say sorrowfully: "We're basically kindred..." If doing either of that would cause her to be hated, Shiraho would have no choice but to commit suicide.

In that case, although it was troublesome, there was only one thing that ought to be done.

No matter what kind of ability this cursed tool possessed (it was also possible that the customer was mistaken and simply believed it was cursed), it had nothing to do with her. Just as she had told the man earlier—taking this kind of object and handling it appropriately without reward, that was something only a person running a charity would do. She had no intention of doing that at all. Someone willing to handle this kind of matter, a nice guy to a fault, would gladly do it.

Shiraho left her chair slightly and reached for the trunk on the counter.

"Seriously—Seriously, that is the only human I cannot understand. What fun is there in the safekeeping of cursed tools? And even if the curses were lifted, there is no reward at all."

While grumbling, Shiraho summoned her entire strength to shove the doll, which had half its body exposed, forcefully back into the trunk. Pushing hard in concert with the pauses in her speech, she continued to murmur to herself:

"Hmm, after all, I can't possibly comprehend... the perverted thought processes of a pervert's—now all that is needed... a place where it's fine for me to send this thing without prior consent... That is all!"

Indeed, this kind of thing must not be kept at home. Shoving cursed tools onto that pervert could be described as perfectly natural and reasonable. Shoving this thing to that perverted male was fine, the one who looked harmless at first glance, but was actually biding his time for a chance to take perverted action, approaching others by all means necessary as soon as he spotted they were girls, muttering perverted words, then making inane excuses like "this was only an accident" while acting out perverted behavior in actual fact...

While thinking over these matters, Shiraho applied her entire body weight through her arms. However, she failed to notice at this time that her elbow had accidentally pressed the doll's nose.

"There!"

Even if by force, anyway, it was fine so long as the doll was shoved in. After forcing the lid shut, Shiraho fastened the metal lock. But probably because she had stuffed the doll into the trunk with full force, the old metal

component looked like it might burst open any time, looking very strained indeed, but Shiraho decided to ignore it. It should last until it reached the other party's home, at least. Then what resulted next was none of her concern.

Next, Shiraho took out a courier order form from under the counter and scribbled an address while reading from her phone's contact list. Then she attached the order form onto the trunk and dialed a phone number.

"Hello? I would like to send out a delivery, could you come pick it up right away?"

While talking to the staff at the courier service, Shiraho pondered. With this, 80% of her job was done. The remaining 20% was contacting the man who had fled to bill him appropriately for the trouble, although she could not be sure if it would work.

(Sigh... I'll call him later when I'm in a better mood. I have to threaten him a bit at least, so as to prevent similar situations from happening again. But if the phone number he wrote down is fake, then the incident ends here.)

Shiraho sighed.

Thus, she lost total interest in the contents of the trunk.

Handing the trunk over to the courier who arrived for the pickup, Shiraho was completely unaware of the dramatic change occurring inside the trunk.

—Inside, after getting elbowed in the nose, the doll had started to transform gradually.

Part 2

The next day, it was Sunday morning at the Yachi residence.

Konoha was leisurely enjoying a long-awaited sunbath on the veranda under the warm sunlight.

Since the laundry was done, the grocery shopping could wait until evening and she had finished her homework last night, there was nothing else to do at the moment. Also, Kuroe had gone off to work while Fear was at school for supplementary lessons, so the house was very quiet. All the conditions for a great holiday were present. To be slightly greedier, it was a rare chance for her to be alone with Haruaki and she really wanted to do

something together. But currently, he had gone back to his room for a nap after staying up all night. Delusionally speaking, napping together by his side would be the ideal choice, but there was no way she could actually do that. Hence, Konoha went for the second best option and decided to use this quiet and peaceful time to enjoy her sunbath to the fullest.

(Ah~ ...So warm~...)

However, this was no ordinary sunbath. One that was undertaken only once in a while—or rather, it could only be undertaken once in a while—

A fully nude sunbath.

At least that was what it felt like for Konoha.

(I knew it... I have to bathe myself in sunlight like this every now and then...)

Sheathed in its black scabbard, the Japanese sword was lying on the veranda, exhaling "huff~" It felt as though all the dampness and other unpleasant odors accumulating in her body were being completely purified by the sunlight. Fufufu, farewell. Since the past and into the future, I will never allow microbes or rust to take over this body. You would do best to give up~

Because it felt too comfortable, Konoha was beginning to feel sleepy, hazily closing the eyes of her senses. What to do? Should she simply fall asleep like this? But what if a visitor arrived? It would be too troublesome, so should she pretend no one was at home? Speaking of which, just earlier when she was doing the laundry, a trunk had been delivered to the house, what was that? Cash on Delivery from a rare sender. Konoha could not bear to wake him up, so she decided to leave the trunk aside for now, but she must not forget to discuss with him later... So sleepy... Yawn~

The wind caressed her body. A refreshing feeling enveloped a part of her that was not normally exposed. The gentle and warm sunlight also penetrated into there. So warm. Her body was feeling numb. An immoral sense of liberation. Ahhh, if only she could lie on a beach and roll around nude in human form, surely she would be able to experience this same feeling. Truly very comfortable.

A happy state, halfway between sleep and wakefulness. A paradise resembling sleep but not fully asleep. Konoha simply allowed the eyelids of her consciousness to remain shut while she floated lightly in this universe

that resembled ambiguous, warm water. It felt like she was thinking of many things, yet not thinking at the same time. The sense of time vanished. The distinction between thoughts and dreams vanished. The distinction between reality and thoughts also vanished.

(Uhyuu... Mmm~ ...Haryuaki-kun... Ufufufu. A sunbath is so warm, Haruaki-kun should hug me tight as well, so warm...)

Her mood felt as though she were having a very blissful dream. Since she was aware of these feelings, it meant that her consciousness was slightly tilted towards wakefulness. Suddenly, Konoha sensed human presence. With hazy eyes, she looked over.

"Eh...?"

"Good morning, Konoha. Sorry for waking you up."

Haruaki was by her side and likewise sitting on the veranda. Wearing his usual smile, speaking in his usual voice of gentleness, dressed in his usual school uniform—But somehow, Konoha felt that something was not right. How odd?

Just as she was about to dispel the lingering drowsiness in her mind, Haruaki lifted Konoha's body lightly.

"Ah, Haruaki-kun...?"

"You're sunbathing? Let me wipe your body."

Konoha had placed a soft handkerchief under herself to serve as a cushion. Picking up the handkerchief, Haruaki began to support Konoha's body in one hand while wiping lightly with the other. Treated by him in this manner... How should Konoha put it? It felt like the last time was a very long time ago.

"Ah, umm, Haruaki-kun..."

"Don't speak, just leave it to me. I'll be very gentle."

"Y-Yes... Well then, umm... I am in your care..."

Although Konoha was feeling very shy, given this rare chance when he was willing to wipe her body, she was unable to refuse. Her mind grew hazy and chaotic again, her consciousness pulled back into a partial state

of sleep. What was going on? Unexpected good fortune. Was this the continuation of a dream?

Concentrate. Holding the handkerchief, his hand was currently rubbing her body gently, sliding along the curves, poking with his finger as though trying to confirm the hardness. His breath blew on her body. Curling his fingers into circles, he rubbed the blade's body, flicking it lightly with his fingertips in a teasing manner.

This manner, numbing and embarrassing, stimulating yet making her ticklish all over, extremely, extremely—

Comfortable—

"Ah, huff... Mmm hmm... H-Haruaki-kun... Umm... A little more..."

"A little more force would be better?"

While hearing the mischievous voice, Konoha felt some kind of powerful impact somewhere.

Instantly, an unpleasant electrical current passed through her body.

"Eeek... Ahhhhh! I-It's the opposite, be more gentle, listen, more gentle, I beg you..."

"Haha, got it. You're so sensitive, Konoha..."

"S-Sensitive...? Nothing of that sort. I am very... very ordinary."

"Really? Oh right, I've wanted to ask you this for a while."

"Huah... W-What is it...?"

"When you transform into this state... Does the structure of the blade correspond clearly to the structure of the human form? For example—the chest. When you're looking like this, Konoha, where is your chest? Is it this round part?"

"Eek... Hyah!"

Unexpected words. Words plunging her mind into greater chaos. Then—no longer separated by fabric, no longer wiping stains off, he was purely using his hands to stroke her body. Applying perfect force at just the right amount. Neither strong nor weak, a stimulating force giving birth to pleasure.

Ahhh, that place was the chest indeed. A place that produced feelings similar to the chest. Hence, don't stroke it back and forth with your palm so frequently, and don't tap lightly with your fingertips—Konoha wanted to speak up but the stimulating electrical currents passing through her body were causing her language center to numb slightly. And that was not all, in the next instant—

"Eh? Then where's your butt? Is it here? Konoha, how's that?"

"Ha, ahhhhh? That's... That's...!? Ah, ah, ah mmm!"

Electrical currents were produced in a new place. His finger, finger, finger was there, her sensitive spot. She was currently twitching and trembling, right? Standing his nails up to perform something akin to play-biting, there was a strange sound. Although it hurt quite a bit, it felt very comfortable. Comfortable, right? What happened? Why was he doing such a thing? Although it felt very comfortable, due to the excessive excitement, Konoha's mind was in total disarray, but... But!

She could hear his light laughter, because they were very close together.

"Oh... Looks like you're the most sensitive here, Konoha. I can hear a wonderful sound coming from you. How exciting. I really want to hear more. So, I'm not going to use my fingers for the next part—"

Konoha predicted a new type of stimulating was coming. Something feeling like warm wind was blowing. No. This was a breath. His breath. Ah, in other words, his lips were approaching her body, his tongue extending towards her sensitive spot, h-h-e intends to lick—!?

"H-Hyawawa!! That place... That place... Not that place——!"

At this moment, it was anyone's guess how her mental circuits were connecting as a straight line dashing across her mind. A direct line linking her rationality with her thoughts. Her panic meter was completely going off the charts with the needle spinning a full circle to return to its original position. Originally hazy due to chaos, pleasure and having just woken up, her consciousness became clear all at once, telling her something extremely important.

—Something is absolutely wrong here!

By the time she regained her senses, Konoha discovered a strange feeling all over her body.

Shaking her body, Konoha freed herself from his palm, turning into human form in midair. Landing in the garden, she held her hand up in a karate chop, facing him who was sitting nonchalantly on the veranda.

"You—Who are you!?"

"What are you talking about? I am me."

The face and voice both belonged to Haruaki. However, something's wrong—Konoha was extremely certain.

Too careless. What an embarrassment. Truly humiliating. She must reflect deeply upon this. No matter how overcome with sleepiness, she could not believe how she failed to notice until now. He was not her owner. Not Yachi Haruaki. Although very similar, he was simply another person possessing Haruaki's form.

"Answer me truthfully. Who on earth are you—"

"I've answered you truthfully already. Yeah... But speaking of which, is this really okay?"

"What are you referring to?"

Konoha kept her knife hand ready without lowering her guard, narrowing her eyes as she asked. But unfazed by her pressure, he smiled and said:

"Say—a vigorous battle stance is very good and all, but you do realize you're showing everything, y'know? Both top and bottom. Oh my, your boobs are really awesome, Konoha. They look so soft, I can almost feel my hands sinking into them, it's unbearable, ah, maybe you're trying to seduce me? Then I'm totally fine with it. Let's pick up directly where we were just now—"

"Kyah! T-Too indecent—!"

Although Konoha desperately tried to convince herself what happened earlier was a misunderstanding, it still came as quite a shock to hear someone saying such things with Haruaki's appearance and voice. She instantly felt as though someone had smacked her hard on the head with a hammer. Instantly, her cheeks went flush red. Extremely bothered by the other person's gaze, she reflexively covered her breasts and crotch, then immediately looked around, searching for something to wear. Finding the laundry ahead of her, in the process of drying, she had no choice but to use it in this urgent emergency—

"...Huh? Oh no!"

Konoha came to a sudden realization. While her attention was diverted for an instant, he—an imposter of Haruaki, that she could be certain, at least—had disappeared from the veranda.

Taking a partially dried blanket from the laundry pole, she wrapped herself up before breaking into a run. Only for an instant, she sensed a presence in the entryway's direction, but by the time she arrived, there were no signs of the fake Haruaki. He had probably run away outside.

"What on earth... is going on? How incomprehensi..."

Just as Konoha narrowed her eyes and murmured, something entered her view. Something possibly related. Something evidently very suspicious.

The trunk delivered earlier, the one she had left at the entrance—It was now open. As though someone had exerted a great force from inside, the metal latch was blown apart, rolling on the floor by her feet. In addition, the trunk was empty with nothing inside it at all.

"..."

Konoha rapidly returned to her room and made a call on her cellphone. She called the person most likely to know the details. The phone rang for a long time as though the other side finally relented and picked up the call.

'...What now? Let me make this clear first of all, I'm currently at school due to supplementary lessons. It just happens to be break currently. If it's anything inane, I shall hang up immediately—'

"Shiraho-san, what was inside the case you sent over?"

Knowing time was precious, Konoha went straight to the point. She could hear Shiraho gasping. A few seconds later—

'Has something... happened?'

"It's already gone beyond the level of something happening."

Hence, Konoha explained what had just happened. The appearance of Haruaki's imposter. Although the appearance was identical to the real person, the behavior and attitude were still quite different.

'Oh~ I-I see...'

"You must know something, right? Your voice clearly sounds suspicious."

After Konoha spoke coldly, Shiraho probably gave up and began to speak amidst sighs:

'I had no intention of hiding anything. Seeing as you people are the experts, I was thinking you would handle things without issue even if I didn't do anything... But now that things have come to this, it sounds like an excuse.'

Then she continued to explain. The beginning of the whole incident. The visitor at her antique shop. The man had brought a doll resembling a mannequin. After getting tricked to reveal information, the man had fled in a panic. Hence, she had concluded it to be a cursed tool and sent it to the Yachi residence.

"Then what is the mannequin's origin?"

'The man was very stupid, because the phone number he filled in the form really connected. Then regarding the information I got out of the man, well... Let me think...'

Shiraho cleared her throat then tried her best to feign calmness as she spoke:

'It's supposedly a cursed doll. Provided someone imagines a certain person engaged in a certain behavior when pressing the switch on the doll's nose, it will transform into that person with that behavior in mind as a goal. By the way, now that I think about it, I might have accidentally touched its nose when I was stuffing that thing back into the trunk... Uh, just possibly, perhaps.'

"W-What did you say? Then let me ask you, what were you thinking at the time!?"

'J-Just the usual, nothing special. At the time, I was thinking of sending the thing to your home... Hence, well, I was thinking of that perverted man doing perverted things... V-Very normal, isn't it?'

Konoha felt a great shock in her mind.

If what Shiraho said was true—

The doll had transformed into Haruaki, prone to doing perverted things as imagined by Shiraho... Isn't that exactly the fake Haruaki who had toyed

with her body repeated, ogled her naked body nonchalantly and even displayed a happy expression on his face!

How was that normal at all!? The way Konoha saw it, Shiraho had a bad impression of Haruaki to begin with, as though it would not be surprising if he sexually harassed Sovereignty no matter what time or place. And just as Shiraho said, she regarded Haruaki as a perverted man and stayed on full alert against him as such. Filtered through Shiraho's perceptions, the pervert form(!) of Haruaki... It would not be surprising for this kind of doll to engage in any amount of indecent behavior, essentially a total demon. Konoha shuddered at the thought.

"H-He must absolutely be stopped!"

'Allow me to provide more information. From what I heard from the man, there are three methods to make the doll return to its original state. One is to allow him to concretely accomplish the action inputted on activation. Right now—In other words, that would probably mean allowing him to accomplish unprecedented levels of perverted behavior to his heart's content. That said, who knows if sexually harassing tens or even hundreds of people might be enough.'

"...Naturally, I cannot allow this sort of thing. The conditions are too vague. Waiting for him to fulfill them would be utterly ludicrous."

'The second is to simply wait for the passage of time. After roughly forty-eight hours, he will turn back into the original doll. Let me state this beforehand, I activated him yesterday evening. Also, if during this time, someone else presses the transformation activation switch again, causing a new transformation, the previous condition will be overridden...'

"Even if nothing is done starting from now, it still means waiting for at least a whole day. Also, what if someone accidentally presses the reactivation switch, then who knows what could happen—Just like for the previous method, the number of victims will only increase. Too impractical. So what is the final method?"

'Apparently, there is switch to forcibly reset.'

"That's the one! I've been waiting for this kind of simple solution!"

Konoha clenched her fists, leaning forward to scream into the telephone.

If possible, she really did not want to personally destroy something bearing his appearance.

"So, where is that switch located?"

'Somewhere on the body.'

"..."

'I-I tried my best to ask that man, but it's his fault. I don't know if he was too afraid but throughout the phone call, he was stammering and stuttering, unwilling to give a straight answer. In a moment of fury, I threatened him: "Out with it now! Or else I will come over to your house immediately and set fire to it!" Then he hung up—'

Of course he'll flee for dear life—Konoha sighed in exasperation. She had no idea if Shiraho noticed, but in any case, Shiraho continued without getting flustered at all:

'Because nothing had happened at that point, I didn't consider this information absolutely essential to know so I didn't contact him again. That's why I don't know the switch's precise location.'

"Sigh... No helping it, I guess we'll just have to find it ourselves. I hope it'll be in an obvious spot."

'But we have no idea regarding its external appearance. Perhaps it's like the nose's activation switch, which means pressing a certain body part.'

"You make a fair point... But since it's a switch after all, it should be possible to identify by touch or texture. After all, no matter what, we'll just have to capture that thing then investigate the entire body."

'I could call that customer again when I'm in a better mood, although I've no idea if he'll pick up or not.'

"I shall wait for your results without too much expectation."

No matter what, Konoha was thankful to discover a solution apart from destroying the doll. However, whether searching the entire body to locate the reset switch or Shiraho miraculously calling successfully and getting the other side to tell her the switch's location, they still needed to catch the doll and confine him first. Left alone, the number of victims would only increase, hence it was imperative to capture the fake Haruaki as quickly as possible.

"Well then, the fake Haruaki has already escaped. Do you have any idea where he might go?"

'He should be bound to the motives of his initial behavior, so I'm thinking he must have run off somewhere to perform perverted actions.'

At this time, Konoha suddenly recalled that he was dressed in school uniform. After telling Shiraho—

'It looks like he is capable of manifesting clothing to some degree. Back when I activated him, the image of the perverted man doing perverted acts in school like a pervert... Hmm, I cannot assert for certain that it did not cross my mind. This might be the cause.'

"I-Isn't that terrible—!?"

The fake Haruaki was currently heading to school with the intent to engage in indecent behavior. Left alone, goodness knows what might happen. Not only were girls going to suffer—but the real Haruaki's future was also at stake.

Keeping the cellphone pressed against her ear, Konoha frantically put on her uniform at the same time. In order to stop the fake Haruaki, she must make her way to school.

'Let me supplement the information with something that just came to mind. I was told that the doll was also used for assassinations before. In other words, he probably possess the characteristic of "accomplishing" orders at any cost no matter what happens or what obstacles he encounters.'

"I don't want to know this kind of information! Argh, how distasteful, to think she would have supplementary lessons today out of all days... Fear-san is at school too!"

'I am also there.'

"Yes, please be careful as well, Shiraho-san. I will hurry over right away!"

'Rest assured, I have already prepared myself to commit suicide by biting my tongue should a critical moment come to pass. Don't worry and make haste.'

A very convoluted signal for help, very much in Shiraho's style. After this final exchange, the two girls hung up.

Having put on her uniform, Konoha rushed out of her room. Currently, the image of the real Haruaki, still sleeping in his own room, flashed across her mind. However, it would be best not to wake him up. Although he would certainly pledge his full effort to help after understanding the situation, things would be troublesome if people saw two Haruakis in school.

Hence, Konoha wrote a note and left it behind in the living room: "I need to go out, please watch the house." Then rushing out the door, she dashed towards the school at top speed.

Part 3

Near the school gates—

A girl dressed as a maid—Sovereignty—was humming a song, sweeping the path leading to the school building's entrance. Although it was a Sunday, she had requested on her own to work on her day off because her lover was coming to school for supplementary lessons.

Although her official title was the superintendent's secretary's assistant-in-training, this type of janitor-like work was also part of her usual duties. She was already used to it—Only on rare occasions would she still make airheaded blunders.

"Hmmhmmmm~♪ Hmmhmmmm~♪"

While Sovereignty was rhythmically playing music with the broom, she suddenly noticed a student passing through the school gates. At this time of the day, supplementary lessons had already started. It was also too late for club activities. Besides, it was Sunday today, which meant that most students would not come to school apart from the aforementioned purposes. Arriving alone to school at this unusual time, how strange. Hence, she turned to look—

"Oh, it's Haruaki-kun! Good morning~!"

She waved hard and called out with a lively greeting. Haruaki also waved his hand lightly, smiling as he made a beeline for her.

"Good morning, Sovereignty. You're very cute today as well."

"Eh? Eh? A-Ahaha~ Thank you! I can't believe you suddenly surprised me with such a greeting... Amazing! You must have planned this performance,

intending to add a bit of color to this boring Sunday with a little surprise, yes? But even as flattery, I'm very happy to hear it!"

Hearing such direct praise, Sovereignty was slightly at a loss how to react. A faint sense of dissonance was also lingering in the depths of her mind. However while she was scratching her head to hide her embarrassment, the feeling soon disappeared. Standing before her, Haruaki was smiling as usual, speaking with his usual voice, hence there was nothing strange—Should be.

However, after walking towards Sovereignty, Haruaki stopped but continued to stare intently at her.

"This isn't flattery. Sovereignty, you've always been very cute. It's true."

"Hyoh?"

"Actually, I've been thinking for a while now, what exactly is the secret to your cuteness? Oh right, do you have the time? I'd like to confirm something."

"Confirm something? Oh, oyoyoyo?"

Just as she tilted her head in puzzlement, Haruaki chuckled and silently grabbed her arm. Then slightly forcefully, he dragged her to the wall surrounding the school. With the wall behind her and tall trees and bushes in front and on the side, this was a space completely isolated from external view.

Haruaki and Sovereignty were extremely close as he looked down towards her. Despite feeling that something was not right, Sovereignty still looked him in the eye.

"Umm, Haruaki-kun, why did you bring me to this kind of place—"

"Uh, sorry. What I want to confirm is... Umm, your chest."

"Ch-Chest? Mine?"

Even though she was dressed in her usual maid outfit, even though he looked at her usually, Sovereignty found his gaze very bothering right now. He seemed to be focusing his attention to observe her cleavage. But since they were both the same as usual, if she acted too self-conscious and covered up her chest now, it would seem too impolite. Hence, Sovereignty

could only shrink her neck back awkwardly, shaking her body. As a result, she then felt that Haruaki was staring at her wobbling bosom.

"Say... You can change the size, right?"

"Y-Yeah, because that's part of my design."

"I guess you usually keep same size, right? In particular, do you decide how many centimeters roughly?"

"Uh, no, I'm a bit casual with the particulars... But because it'd be bad to arouse suspicions in people not in the know at places like school, I always make them roughly the same size every day."

"Indeed, that's exactly it. That's what I wanted to confirm!"

Haruaki took a step forward, his eyes incomparably serious. Intimidated by his forcefulness, Sovereignty took a step back. Her back bumped into the wall. Subconsciously, she gripped the broom tightly that was still in her hand.

Then with an expression that could not be more serious, exuding airs like an adventurer, Haruaki said:

"I said it just now, you're very cute. But I was thinking, there must be what could be called best size for you, right? There should be a combination that makes you look the most dazzling and attractive, right? Although I've no idea if it would be bigger or smaller than the current size."

"Hoeh?"

"Ah yes... There's also the shape. Shapes can come in a unlimited variations, right? Like pendulums-shaped or bowl-shaped. Including these combinations, there must be so many types that it's impossible to count them all. But no matter what, I'm curious. No matter what, I want to confirm your best appearance. So I beg you, please let me confirm. I will help. As long as it's within my ability, I will help out—"

Haruaki closed in on Sovereignty, step by step, meanwhile staring at her bust relentlessly, staring intently at the cleavage exposed by the maid outfit. As though doing some kind of warmup exercise, he kept moving the fingers of both hands frequently.

Sovereignty pressed her back tightly against the wall behind her.

"Hold on, hold on—!"

"You're... unwilling?"

"R-Rather than unwilling—"

"I remember on a certain date before, didn't you let me touch them? You even asked me to rub them."

"That was umm... Like an accident, and it was only once, that's all. A-Anyway, now is different from that time! Right now... How should I put this? I feel a powerful aura coming from your body, Haruaki-kun! And umm—I... That's right, I am Shiraho's lover after all! She'll get mad!"

"Just treat it as a secret between the two of us... Then there's no problem."

Haruaki spoke in a gentle voice and took another step forward. So excessively bold of him. But conversely, it also implied that he was truly serious. Sovereignty could feel herself getting hot instantly deep inside her body. To think that Haruaki-kun wanted to touch my chest this much, this badly, this seriously—?

No no no!

"I should say... Right! I'm working right now! I'm only half done with my sweeping, so I can't play around! Not allowed... to disturb me!"

Holding the broom firmly in her hands, Sovereignty swung it lightly in front of Haruaki. I really don't want to use this broom for anything apart from sweeping—She thought to herself at the same time.

"...Really? You're right. I'm sorry. I get it. I'll give up on the matter of your chest. I didn't come to school because I really had something to do, so as an apology, let me help you sweep."

Sovereignty breathed a sigh of relief. As expected, communication was possible with a proper discussion.

"R-Really? That's good—"

"Oh, but excuse me. It'd be a bit shameless to call this a reward for helping you sweep, but just one, I still have another favor to ask! Could you turn into a boy for a while?"

"...?"

As much as Sovereignty was filled with doubt, this favor was completely opposite to the breast-groping request earlier. Instead, it seemed completely unrelated to indecent developments. "Then please wait a sec." Hence, Sovereignty nodded at Haruaki, then turned her back towards him. Rubbing her chest to give stimulation, she caused her bosom to deflate, turning the volume to zero. Then she swiftly reached her hand beneath her skirt, turning a necessary body part into a necessary form. Although there was little change in voice, Sovereignty still went "ah~ ah~" to perform a youth's vocal exercises, then turned around.

"Okay, transformation done. Haruaki-ku—Hyahhhhhhhh!?"

However, Sovereignty was unable to turn around at all, because Haruaki had hugged him from behind during the process. His shoulders were completely surrounded by Haruaki while he felt breathing on his neck.

"W-What? What what what—?"

"On further thought, I've seldom had contact with you as a boy. So, there's a lot of things I want to confirm."

"C-Confirm what... Didn't we... take a bath together before...?"

"Really? Oh my, what does it matter? Anyway, I just want to know. See, like the texture of your wavy hair, the reactions of your ear or the softness of your cheeks..."

"H-Hyauuuuuuu!"

Haruaki used his index finger to lift her slightly curling strands of hair, then blew into her ear that was exposed to the air and poked her cheek. During this time, Haruaki used his other arm to hug her tightly. No, this had already surpassed a simple hug.

Sovereignty had taken on male form while dressed in a maid outfit. Naturally, with disappearance of the body fat responsible for the cleavage, so did the bulge supporting the fabric, thus resulting in a large opening in front of the chest—

Then Haruaki inserted his hand whole into the opening in the loose fabric.

"H-Haruaki-kun!? Th-This isn't right? I don't think this is right!"

"Totally no problem, what are you talking about? We are both the same gender right now... So this is purely skin contact between friends. This is

just for fun, a game, that's all. This doesn't count as betrayal against your lover..."

"N-No way... Mmm..."

Stroke stroke stroke, stroke stroke stroke. Sovereignty's flat chest was getting stroked back and forth, as though Haruaki was looking for something. "Ah!" Sovereignty moaned, his mind started to become hazy.

"Wait, no good, that's—!"

"I'm just confirming. This is just friendly skin contact between guys... But if I really had to be honest, I'm wavering a little."

"...Hueh?"

Sovereignty turned his head to look at Haruaki who was next to his face. Breathing a little quickly, he looked into Sovereignty's eyes up close and said:

"It's unexpectedly exciting. So, I can't help but think... Boy and boy is fine too."

"E-Ehhhhhhh!? Th-Those kinds of people exist, but I still don't think it's quite right—!?"

Sovereignty used both hands to push Haruaki's neck area, trying to push him away but could not somehow. Clearly Sovereignty was already using his true strength. Clearly Sovereignty knew that his strength was supposed to be higher than an ordinary human's. Why?

During this time, Haruaki even pressed his weight on Sovereignty.

He breathed scorching hot breath on Sovereignty's exposed neck.

Then parting his lips slightly, he extended his tongue—

Seeking more contact between mucous membranes and flesh, he approached Sovereignty's skin—

"TAKE. THIIIIIISSSSSSSSSS—!"

A mighty shout that seemed to shake the world and split the ground asunder. A roar that made the soul tremble.

Then immediately, Sovereignty heard a dull thud.

Due to too many things happening at once, his brain's processing capacity could not keep up with the flow. Sovereignty's mental circuits instantly froze. The world began to spin. The things before his eyes, which of them were real and which belonged in dreams? Sovereignty saw his familiar lover, a flying skirt, a shiny metal baseball bat, Haruaki struck flying—At this moment, because Sovereignty was still pushing his body with move hands, instantly, apparently due to using too much strength, Sovereignty accidentally pressed Haruaki's nose. During this time, Sovereignty's view and consciousness continued to spin chaotically while aimless thoughts continued to spill out.

(Awawa, uwawawa, hawawawa, what's with Haruaki-kun? Although I don't understand at all, this is too terrible! I must do my work. Last time at the public bath, was he looking at me with the same eyes? Say, doesn't that make public baths very problematic places? After all, the men basically don't cover up their bodies, rather, the more they worked out the more they wanted to show off. It's like when going into the female bath, women deliberately emphasize their busts the bigger their breasts are. So supposing Haruaki-kun is very interested in well-trained muscles, the male bath would be paradise allowing unlimited viewing, then he'll become super excited! Uwawa, the world is spinning before my eyes—)

It felt like motion sickness. Sovereignty could feel his legs suddenly losing strength.

Then his consciousness fell into darkness.

"Sovereignty! Hey, Sovereignty, hang in there—!"

"Kyu..."

Sovereignty felt as though stars were spinning around his head as Shiraho supported him, limp and unable to move. Shiraho called out desperately, but due to excessive shock, Sovereignty was already close to being in a coma.

"I think I just heard a very loud sound... Oh no! Am I too late!?"

Rustling as she pushed bushes apart, Konoha emerged from behind. Finally you arrive—Shiraho went hmph.

"That's right, the situation almost developed beyond the point of no return—Although he has long entered the territory I absolutely forbid! That was historically unprecedented perverted behavior that ought to be recorded in the entire world's history books, sexual war crimes that must be condemned by the collective conscience of all living beings!"

"Uh, although I don't know the details... I never would have expected to see Sovereignty-san in this kind of state... You have my condolences. As much as I'm curious about why she turned into a boy, I'd rather not pry. After all, it doesn't seem like it'll be good for my mental health."

"I agree. But anyway, where is the main object..."

At this moment, Shiraho looked around and sighed deeply.

"...I clearly smashed him with all my strength, but apparently he still escaped."

"Using that thing... You smashed him with all your strength?"

Konoha seemed to be narrowing her eyes at her. Shiraho raised the metal baseball bat she was holding in her right hand.

"That's right, smashing with full strength. With a running start at maximum speed, swinging with full might, I even aimed precisely at the back of his head, but never did I expect him to be so durable. He must have escaped while I was helping Sovereignty up."

"Did it even occur to you at all what consequences there would be if he turned out to be the real person...?"

"Now that you mention it, no, it never occurred to me at all."

Breaking out in cold sweat, Konoha smiled politely, frozen on the spot.

Did I give some sort of weird reply? Shiraho wondered in puzzlement while speaking with full confidence:

"Even if it was the real person, it would not change the fact that he was perpetrating an unforgivable and historic act of perversion against Sovereignty. In other words, after seeing that, it does not change what I am duty-bound to do. After all, it's ultimately all the same. Doesn't matter."

"On the other hand, I do wish that somewhere in a corner of your mind, Shiraho-san, you could retain some slight thoughts of treasuring others' lives in a show of humanitarianism..."

"Rejected. I have never heard of a humanitarian who goes so far as to treasure the lives of pests. Besides, with this, we now know at least that there is no reset switch on the back of his head. We have taken a step forward. You ought to thank me instead."

"Oh..."

"Putting this aside—" Shiraho looked towards a direction where the imposter might have escaped.

"That guy's appearance really does resemble the perverted man's appearance to an indistinguishable degree. I think it would be best to hurry and chase him down."

"By this time, supplementary lessons are almost over. Simply because of the increase in the number of students out and about, the risk will rise correspondingly—By the way, Shiraho-san, what about your supplementary lesson?"

"Do you believe there is anything in this world more important than protecting Sovereignty's chastity?"

"...Please do your best in your next round of supplementary lessons. Well then, what needs to be done next is—Because he was born from your imagination, Shiraho-san, if we had to speculate on his next actions, surely he would prioritize people from your imagination and sexually harass them. In other words, we must find Fear-san first."

"Then I'll leave it to you. Before Sovereignty wakes up, I must attend to her."

Probably expecting Shiraho's answer, Konoha did not complain and simply said "Well then, please take care" before running to the school building.

Positioning the still-dizzy Sovereignty to rest on her lap, Shiraho used her fingers to gently comb his hair—At this moment, she suddenly remembered.

Then she threw a glance in the direction where Konoha had disappeared. Although there was one thing she had forgotten to mention... It was

probably no help by this point. Besides, it was just a vague feeling she had.

(Basically, I think Sovereignty might have pushed his nose just now, which means that his mode of behavior might very well be altered slightly... But whatever. After all, there's no definite evidence. It's not like it's something I need to phone her specifically to let her know. That's for sure.)

Part 4

"Phew~ It's over..."

Sitting in a chair inside the classroom, Fear swiveled her neck left and right. She never expected she would end up forced to take supplementary lessons again. However, this was her own fault—She had been a bit too careless on the last exam. And because she had been too careless, half of a precious Sunday was gone. She really must do her best on the next exam.

Noisily packing up her notes and stationery on the desk, she suddenly heard someone open the classroom door. Casually looking over, Fear found someone unexpected.

"Isn't this Kirika? What happened? You're not here for supplementary lessons, right?"

Kirika the honors student could not possibly have failed an exam. Of course, she was not part of club activities either. Given the case, why was she dressed in uniform as usual, carrying her schoolbag, coming to school on Sunday?

While walking to her seat, Kirika shyly made a wry smile and said:

"Just an absolutely ridiculous blunder. I left the handout due tomorrow in my desk and only found out last night when I was doing homework. I originally considered doing it in the morning tomorrow, but it seems like the homework's load isn't that easily finished—So that's why I came to school to retrieve it."

"What~? If it's something so minor, you could've just text messaged me. I could have delivered it to your home on the way back."

"I only discovered there were supplementary lessons after I arrived in school. I also had no idea that our classroom was being used for

supplementary lessons, so I ended up having to wait until the lesson ended."

"Nuhoho, that's really unlike you to make this kind of airheaded mistake, Kirika."

"That's so true." Kirika smiled and took out the handout from her desk, stuffing it into a folder and putting it into her bag.

"Then my business is done. Fear-kun, your supplementary lessons are over, right? Want to leave together?"

"Exactly what I was thinking! But the lesson just now consumed an inordinate amount of energy, my throat feels so thirsty... Let's buy some juice from the vending machine in the cafeteria and take a break before heading out, okay?"

"Sure, I don't mind at all. Oh right, are there any of our acquaintances in the supplementary lessons today?"

"Hmm~" Fear looked up at the ceiling and recalled.

"There's Shiraho... who was still here until halfway, but as soon as break arrived, she ran off to who knows where. She should be attending the Ancient Japanese supplementary lesson at the end, but she never came back. To dare ditch class, that's so bold. As for others—"

Fear turned her gaze and glanced at the classroom door. She recalled the figure of the girl who had stumbled out of the classroom a moment before Kirika came in.

"That girl was here too. Although it's understandable, I find it quite incredible. From the organization's standpoint, is it okay for her to take supplementary lessons?"

"Oh that girl huh...? Despite the goal of seeking the unknown, that doesn't mean she'll definitely pass every school exam. Hmph, looks like this proves once again how inane and worthless the concept of seeking the unknown is. How absolutely ridiculous."

As usual, bringing up this subject made Kirika displeased. Fear deliberately tried to sound cheerful and got up from her chair.

"Okay~ I'm ready! Let's go, Kirika, juice tastes especially good after supplementary lessons!"

"Hoho, I'm sure the same goes for juice after making a trip just to get something forgotten at school."

Hence, Fear and Kirika left the classroom together. At the same time, Fear was thinking, due to supplementary lessons taking up the majority of Sunday, she must spend the remaining part of the day more happily than usual.

...Of course—

Due to attending supplementary lessons, Fear had switched off her cellphone. Not once did she ever consider the anxiety Konoha felt as a result of failing to contact her.

As for Kirika, who happened to come to school to pick up something she had forgotten, she was totally unaware that Konoha was thinking: "Since today is Sunday, Ueno-san can't possibly be at school" and had given up contacting her.

Hence, walking along the corridor, the two girls simply smiled at each other.

Completely oblivious to what was happening at this time.

Neither were they aware of what was about to happen next—

Part 5

"Sorry it's so sudden, but your muscles really are great. Extremely—awesome."

"My answer: I give the response that being praised does not make me feel uncomfortable. But I am a little suspicious..."

"As expected of a warrior, this is unlike other people's flabby meat. If other people were lazy little pigs, then you must be the lion, the king of the beasts! The hunter among hunters, the one who understands nature and its unpredictability best! Ahhh, I really want to have muscles like you... Hey, can you help me investigate ways to build up muscle?"

"Although I find it suspicious... Putting that aside first, I should support your wanting to understand the unknown. Since I want to give you full assistance, I will provide assistance."

Hearing things such as "hunter among hunters" or "as expected of a warrior," Un Izoey could not help but feel a little elated, but surely this had nothing to do with mood, she was simply reaching the conclusion of assisting him based on logic. Hence, she nodded repeatedly. Smiling happily, he took her hand and led her to a cramped space at the bottom of the staircase. Here, no one else would see them.

"So, to investigate how to build up muscle... I guess touching is the best?"

"My agreement: that should be correct. So, where do you want to start touching? I predict that my legs should have the most developed muscles."

Seeing her make the suggestion proactively, he stared wide-eyed for a split second before smiling.

"I'm so glad you're so understanding. Hoho, then I'll take your offer..."

"...!"

Kneeling down, he touched the muscles and tendons of her ankle with his fingers. That place was a warrior's critical vulnerability. All someone malicious needed to do was make a cut with a razor and that would mean the end of a warrior's career. But at the very least, she could tell between those who could be trusted and those who could not. He had no intention to harm. As for other intentions... Frankly speaking, although he said he wanted to investigate muscles, she still had no idea what was going on.

His fingers slowly climbed up along her leg. First he reached her calf, squeezing and kneading it. Un Izoey wondered if he found it hard or soft, quite curious about what he thought. The reason was also unknown. His hand moved further up, touching the back of her knee, rubbing up and down, he seemed to be confirming the tactile texture.

"Oh... I didn't expect it to be so soft. It feels quite nice to touch. Your muscles are very even."

"R-Really? It appeared... Mmm! A reaction I don't understand..."

Half-crouching now, he moved his hand further up, reaching her thigh. The thigh full of muscles. Perhaps for this reason, he spent the longest time there and was the most thorough, stroking and rubbing at key points. Sometimes he used the pads of his fingers, or the palm of his hand, massaging sometimes while using his fingertips to knead on others. Furthermore, he was using both hands, targeting the entire area of both

thighs while investigating multiple locations simultaneously. When massaging the inner side of the thigh, he would use his thumb to stimulate the surface.

"! ...Ah... Mmm..."

"How's that?"

"How's that...?"

"Because you made a pleased sound, I'm thinking this might have a massaging effect?"

"My answer... Unknown. This is truly unknown... An unbelievable feeling... Huah... Mmm!"

"Hoho, even though your face is expressionless as usual, you're holding back forcefully, making sounds while your body is trembling nonstop... Too amazing, it's really exciting. In other words, you don't know what's going on with your body either? I'd really like to continue, but lemme ask first—Should I stop?"

He was doing this for the sake of elucidating the unknown. If she disallowed it despite clearly also wanting to elucidate the unknown, that would be far too tyrannical, hence she really ought to assist him. Besides, she also wanted to enjoy this incredibly comfortable sensation—Correction, she wanted to investigate this unknown sensation, that's right. Probably, definitely.

"P-Please... continue..."

"Really? I'm so happy, thank you. If you've got any questions, just go ahead and let me know... Muscles, thighs, so sturdy, so sturdy, thighs, quadriceps! Wonderful! This is really wonderful!"

The movements of his hands became even more forceful. Then slowly, slowly, his fingers began to stroke up her thighs. Stroking their way beneath the skirt of her uniform that had been hiked up for ease of movement. Then from the thigh, almost about to touch the root of her thigh—

She frantically stopped him.

She had no choice but to stop him.

"My judgment... That place... should not have muscle...!"

"—You're right. Well then, I'll examine the upper body's muscles next."

Saying that, his voice sounded like he was very interested in their conversation. He swiftly straightened up and approached her, this time tracing his hands across her neck, then touching her shoulders. Simply pointing with his index finger, he slid down from her shoulder as though tracing a water droplet, then gliding down the curves of the bosom—Was that a place where men were allowed to touch casually? Did this country's culture allow this type of thing? Un Izoey had reservations but because his attitude was too natural, perhaps she was mistaken. Just as she was spacing out, thinking over these matters, his finger went past her bulging chest and continued to slide down—

"Right, speaking of the upper body's muscles, it's this place..."

Reaching this open territory below her uniform, below the chest, exposed due to her unfastened buttons.

"Hmm..."

He traced out her abdominal muscles with his finger. This was a type of unknown that made both her body and her lungs tremble. As though unable to contain his excitement and emotional turmoil, he said in a raised voice:

"Ahhh... Too amazing, muscles are really amazing. Your muscles are awesome! Full of elasticity, this unique bouncing force is something that no type of high-tech resin can rival. Yet it's also very supple, so comfortable that it makes me want to keep touching it forever, almost like an angel! You are an angel, a muscle angel! Muscle! Move it a little more, let me feel your muscles!"

"Ah... Huff... Ah... Ah!"

As though his limiter had been removed, he kept caressing Un Izoey's abdominal muscles back and forth. Due to this unknown ticklish sensation, her back kept trembling. His fingertips rushed along the surface of her muscles, using the pads of his fingers to confirm their elasticity.

But a problem was generated at this point.

"Move it more, move your muscle a bit more! Ah, is it here? Maybe if I touch it here, you'll tremble even more intensely? Looks veyr sensitive, so I'm probably right? Hurry and tremble, come—!"

"Huff... Ah... Ah—!"

She felt a presence. No good. His finger was about to touch that spot. Only that spot must not be allowed!

Un Izoey suddenly regained her senses and her body moved reflexively.

Spinning around to swap positions with him, she raised her right knee high to chest-level, putting up a battle stance to defend against his hands. Then keeping her right knee raised, she prevented the other party from continuing the attack.

Un Izoey desperately controlled her breathing that had quickened without her noticing, but to prevent him from discovering it, she feigned calmness in her voice and said:

"Th-That spot, the navel must not be touched by others. Based on this restriction, I must restrict you. Navel is the extremely important passage for raama to flow to puusaga and also center of human body, so, umm, umm—in my tribe... Umm..."

"...?"

Most likely startled by her sudden reaction, he simply blinked repeatedly with a face of puzzlement.

Due to abruptly coming to her senses, Un Izoey suddenly felt very embarrassed about her attitude so far. Both perplexed and confused. No good. The exploration of the unknown must be interrupted. Besides, it really was too embarrassing.

"I-In other words! This is a very important spot, so this cannot continue. My recollection and confession: from a long time ago, I wanted to say this to this country's people very much. In other words, no matter who in this country—including you—everyone should cherish the navel and express their respect, and should understand that this is the human body's private spot that needs to be treated carefully..."

Un Izoey stuttered, trying to hide her embarrassment while at extending her raised knee forward at the same time.

Then using that leg's big toe, she flicked him in the nose. By using her foot to flick his nose, she told him that everything was over, at the same time conveying some element of a warning.

"Then... Apologies, I must be going."

Probably due to the impact of flicking his nose (although she did not think she used much force at all), his face lifted up, staring into the air, spacing out without moving.

But because she did not know when he might revive and demand to touch and play with her navel again, Un Izoey turned around and left him, escaping from the space under the stairs.

She thought over what had happened so far.

She never expected him to be someone so interested in muscles. Thank goodness this fact became known. She also felt very comfortable—correction again, she experienced an intriguing sense of the unknown. Furthermore, if it were just the thigh muscles, letting him touch further was not unacceptable. Until he was satisfied, he could touch for as long as he wanted. However—

(The navel, sure enough... still a bit... too early.)

An unknown sense of heat accumulated in her cheeks. In order to make it dissipate, she expressionlessly rubbed her cheeks.

Yes, really, only that spot must not be touched by others casually.

It must be undertaken with cautious thought first. A longer, more in-depth talk must be undertaken first.

—Because back in her tribe, the navel was a spot where only married spouses were allowed to touch.

Part 6

Normally, there were kitchen ladies in charge of cooking, but because it was Sunday, the kitchen was locked up tight. However, the student cafeteria with all the tables was still open to entry. While chatting casually with Kirika, Fear sipped juice bought from the vending machine. At this moment—

"It's terrible, Fear! Class Rep!"

"Hmm, Yachi?"

"Why are you at school? Did you forget something at school too?"

What an unexpected development. With a face full of alarm, Haruaki had suddenly rushed into the cafeteria, panting heavily, grabbing Fear's hand with a very serious expression, pulling her up from her seat.

"No, it's not like that, but anyway, it's terrible! Hurry and come with me!"

"W-Wahhhh, stop dragging me! What's wrong? What's going on?"

"You too, Class Rep, come with us!"

"I don't quite get it... But it looks like this is no ordinary situation. Please explain later."

Due to Haruaki's forcefulness, Fear had no choice but to follow and let him pull her arm for now.

Soon after, the trio arrived at the sports equipment storage in a corner of the school grounds. Probably because it had been used by clubs in the morning, the door was not locked.

It was a space with dust flying all around, colored traffic cones dumped haphazardly and cages where balls were kept. After pushing Fear and Kirika into the storeroom, Haruaki shut the sliding door with a clatter. Due to the presence of a fairly large window, it was not totally dark inside.

"So, why did you bring us to this kind of place? Now that supplementary lessons have finally finished, I was planning to enjoy myself leisurely... Has some kind of issue come up?"

"Issue? That's right, there's a huge issue. There's something I must ask you two to do together."

"If you say so, it must be something very serious... So, what is it?"

After Kirika narrowed her eyes and asked, Haruaki nodded in an extremely, overly serious expression.

Then staring intently at the two girls, he spoke each word clearly—

"Navels... Please show them. Both of you."

"Huh?"

Fear almost thought she had heard wrong, but apparently not. Haruaki's expression remained unchanged. Fear could not help but think, was this some kind of Japanese idiom that she did not know? Hence, she looked at Kirika beside her, but this only ended up with two puzzled faces staring at each other.

"Hey, damn shameless brat, why are you making this kind of demand? If you're trying to pull something weird, I'll curse you!"

"Th-That's right, Yachi, tell us the reason. It's far too weird to make this type of request out of the blue. How absolutely ridiculous—"

"Don't talk anymore, just hurry and do as I say! This is really... something very important...!"

Haruaki did not back down in response to the two's complaints. Instead, strengthening his tone of voice, he took a step towards them and placed each of his hand on Fear and Kirika's shoulder respectively, his eyes glowing with vigor.

He did not look like he was joking at all. All that could be felt from him was an aura of seriousness. This was genuine and powerful willpower and desire that the usually boring and wooden Haruaki seldom displayed. Stared in the face by these eyes of his, Fear could not help but feel her heart skip a beat.

This affair was totally mind boggling. Nevertheless, Haruaki's expression looked too serious, already far beyond the level of a joke or whimsical fancy. Then perhaps there might be some sort of reason that could not be explained in detail—

Exchanging glances briefly with Kirika once again, Fear said:

"Hmm... I don't quite get it, but since you say so... After all, it's just the belly button. You've already seen it a number of times, like after taking baths."

"I-It's not the first time for me either... So, umm, n-no helping it. And if it's here, there's no worry of getting seen by others. Just briefly, okay, so all that's needed is for us to expose our navels...?"

"Yeah, just show your navels."

Fear frowned lightly with her lips while unbuttoning the bottom of her uniform, opening it outwards. This happened to make it look similar to Un Izoey's usual manner of wearing her uniform. Cheeks going slightly scarlet,

Kirika also undid her uniform buttons and embarrassedly rolled the bottom of her shirt up to the top of her belly—amidst the color of flesh, faint glimpses of the black leather covering her body came into view.

"I-I've shown it. Is this okay?"

"Hmm, this is unexpectedly embarrassing. Hey, stop staring nonstop, Yachi, absolutely ridiculous... Gah..."

"Yes, this is fine. Hold it and don't move for now, you two."

Arranging Fear and Kirika side by side while keeping their postures with their uniforms pulled up, Haruaki knelt down in front of them, positioning his gaze to have their navels at eye level, then staring with full focus. He stared with inexplicably passionate eyes.

"Hmm... So it's like this... Ohoh..."

"W-What do you mean, 'so it's like this'!?"

"Fear's navel... It's small and white, like a pretty flower. Class Rep's shape is more gentle... Hmm, I love this kind of navel too."

"Flower?"

"Love—?"

Fear and Kirika could not help but question acutely, but Haruaki continued with a face that could not be more solemn:

"However, seriously—This is bad. At this rate, this will be very bad."

"What are you talking about!? I thought you were praising us, but what's going on now!?"

"Yachi, it's very bad? A-Absolutely ridiculous, so there's actually something weird going on with my navel...?"

His manner of speech and expression remained very serious. Fear could not help but think, perhaps just as he said, something extremely terrible was happening. To make Haruaki, who usually acted like a dry old man, to get so serious, the only thing coming to Fear's mind was—It must be something related to cursed tools, right? For example, someone might have used a bizarre tool to spread a curse infecting people indiscriminately like some kind of epidemic, then only by examining the navel could the infection be identified—Something of that sort. In that case, she could

understand why Haruaki would do this sort of thing so forcefully that there was no time to explain.

Still kneeling down in front of Fear and Kirika, Haruaki shifted his gaze left and right, switching back and forth between observing their navels. Why did he gulp so audibly? Was he nervous? Was he scared? Or was it some other emotion? At any rate, Fear thought, something serious must definitely be happening.

"H-Hey Haruaki, stop staying silent. Say something. What should we do..."

"I know—Let's try it out. After all, anything would be better than the current situation. Fear, lie down on that mat first. Of course, you still need to keep your navel exposed."

"Hmm...?"

Fear obediently lay down on a mat used for track and field. Haruaki then said:

"Then you, Class Rep—Lie down on top of Fear's body. Face to face."

"W-What?"

"Hurry, Class Rep! Please!"

"Guh, okay... I'll definitely have you explain properly later, Yachi...!"

Probably intimidated by Haruaki's serious appearance, Kirika took care to hold down her skirt while getting on the mat. Then she knelt down next to Fear's waist and putting her hand above Fear's shoulder—in other words, Kirika's posture was now as though she were pinning Fear down on her back. Having Kirika's face up close was making Fear feel very embarrassed. Her soft, sleek hair, dangling down was also tickling Fear greatly.

"Next, Class Rep, move your belly lower. Like putting Fear's navel and your own navel together!"

"Guh..."

Fear could feel the draping end of Kirika's uniform touching her abdominal area. In other words, Kirika was following Haruaki's instructions, pushing her body slightly lower.

"That's right, like that... Yes..."

Haruaki bent down, standing next to Fear's lower half, he gazed intently at that spot—namely, where the navels were pointed at each other. Staring while inexplicably panting a little, at the same time, he was muttering something quietly in his lips.

"Like this, two of them... I can see two navels at once... Awesome... Two awesome navels combined, the view is even more awesome, navels, navels, navels! Smooth little holes, tender little holes. It feels like I'm about to get sucked inside, it feels like almost everything will be sucked inside, ahhh, I really wanna go in, really wanna go in..."

"...Hold on, I can't hear it clearly, but you seem to be saying strange things—"

"Honestly—This is bad. In terms of unbearability, this is really bad! Class Rep, move closer a bit! Please, I beg you, press even closer together! Press your navel together with Fear's!"

"A-Absolutely ridiculous, what the heck, this is totally nonsensical... I don't care anymore! Here, look, are you happy now? How absolutely ridiculous...!"

Haruaki urged with eagerness, causing Kirika to move even closer to Fear in confusion but also with apparent resignation. Bending her elbows and knees, following Haruaki's instructions, she allowed their navels to overlap. In the next instant, two warm abdomens were pressed together.

"Yes, that's exactly it! Ahhhh... This scene, I can only pray! I really want to pray!"

"Mmm, huah... Hold on, damn shameless brat, your face is too near, there's no need for you to stare so hard, is there? And your breath is getting on my tummy... Hey, you're not prostrating in worship right now, are you? Am I imagining things!?"

"It's your imagination."

"Say, it's time you start explaining... Also, perhaps because you keep staring, my navel feels so ticklish."

Due to the warmth of Kirika's abdomen, Fear could feel her own navel sweating slightly. Hence, she squirmed her body while reaching towards her belly, causing Haruaki to widen his eyes all of a sudden.

"Idiot! No, stop it now! How can you scratch with your fingers, that's so disrespectful! You have to treat it with caution, it's a very important place!"

"But Yachi, I feel ticklish too... C-Can we stop maintaining this posture?"

"I said no already! I know, leave it to me, I will be the one to protect your navels! No matter what, I will protect them to the very end! I will be very gentle, keeping them safe without leaving a single scar... Using this...!"

An instant later—

The belly, warm to begin with, sensed a new source of warmth.

"Nuho—!? Haruaki, hey! Damn you, shameless brat! I-I'll curse you, what are you doing!?"

"Yachi! Hey, mmm! Stop it... Not... there!"



Without any hesitation, Haruaki was forcibly pressing his nose into the space between Fear and Kirika's navels. With the two girls' uniforms pulled up, their exposed abdomens were forming a sandwich with Haruaki's face.

Immediately, Haruaki breathed lightly while producing new sensations in the area around Fear's navel.

With full concentration, as though treating some kind of treasure, gingerly, he&mash;

Began to lick.

"Hyah, heeheehehahauheeheehee!?"

"What the... Ha, ah, gah... A-Absolutely ridiculous... That's... mmm guh—!"

Tickled to the verge of tears, Fear's hazy vision saw Kirika twitching and trembling on top of her. At the same time, in response to Haruaki's inexplicable and incomprehensible behavior, Fear's mind was plunged into total chaos.

Fear thought honestly to herself—

No good.

Haruaki was broken.

Part 7

"Oh! Huff... Ah... So ticklish..."

"Yachi, what on earth are you trying to do? It's time for you to stop—Guh... Ah!"

"Yes, you two are wonderful. So exciting, it's perfect... I've never seen this sort of scene before. From here on, I will protect them for you like this, so please don't touch them on your own."

"I-I'm not trying to touch...!"

"Don't lie. The way you looked just now, surely you've been playing with this by yourself all the time..? What an impatient girl you are."

"! Ugh... Ah..."

"Class Rep, are you that comfortable? You look like you're having trouble speaking. Relax, you don't need to worry at all, I will take good care of you. That's right, Fear and Class Rep's navels both belong to me, I absolutely won't hand them over to anyone else... Ahhh, ahhh! I really want to lick them forever! I can't hold back anymore, although I will treat you two gently, I will up the intensity while doing it gently! Relax, I understand! I understand everything! So even though it'll be more intense, don't worry, feel free to cry out, come, come, yes, smooch—"

Konoha was standing frozen like a statue, but this had gone way past the limit.

Reaching towards the sliding door to the sports equipment storage where these voices were coming from, her arm kept trembling—

"TH-THIS. ENDS. HERE. NOW—!"

Then slicing the sliding door into two in one stroke, she rushed into the storeroom.

Instantly, the scene inside deluded her into seeing the world split apart before her eyes. Fear was lying on an athletic mat, her clothing disheveled. Likewise with disheveled clothing, Kirika was lying on top of Fear. Both of them had bright red faces, panting heavily, their bodies stiff, staring into space. In addition, with his face stuffed into the space between the two girls' bellies—Naturally, it was the fake Haruaki.

"C-Cow... Tits?"

"Kono... ha-kun..."

Fear and Kirika's moistened eyes recognized her, calling her name with lips where saliva was almost dripping out. At the same time, the fake Haruaki stopped licking their skin and turned to look at Konoha. The fake. He was the fake. However, due to bearing Haruaki's appearance and figure, for a being like that to be doing whatever he wanted to those two girls' sensitive spots (even though it was quite different from what she expected), naturally, it went without saying, totally obviously—This was absolutely unforgivable.

"I-Immorality Blocker (Bloodless Variant)!"

Even though Konoha's wrath had rocketed sky high, she was still unable to chop and dismember the doll that bore Haruaki's outer appearance.

Hence, sealing away the sword's sharpness, she simply aimed the edge of her palm against him, taking a step forward with the intent to blow him away. However—

"!"

With lightning speed, the fake Haruaki withdrew from Fear and Kirika. This speed was on a level absolutely impossible for the real Haruaki's athletic abilities and reflexes, agile enough to rival a first-rate gymnast. Fleet of foot, the fake Haruaki backed away. Only after creating a certain distance did he giggle and smile at Konoha.

"Hi, Konoha."

"Please don't call my name so familiarly... Speaking of which, Shiraho-san mentioned that you were used for assassinations in the past. Then it's no wonder how you can perform the movements just now. Apparently, you also possess sufficient defense to shrug off a strike from a baseball bat, unharmed."

Thinking back now, Konoha realized that it must be due to his capabilities that he managed to escape from home earlier. After all, no matter how distracted she was from being naked, if he were merely a cloning doll, he definitely could not have fled so easily. This doll possessed superhuman mobility as befitted a cursed tool.

(So... What should I do?)

Konoha narrowed her eyes, paying attention to his movements. The fake Haruaki tilted his face up, casually scratching his head, at the same time moving his ankles, creating distance imperceptibly.

"Although I don't quite understand... I really don't want to get close to you when you're angry. There's also this foreboding feeling."

The fake Haruaki's gaze turned to the side—glancing at the window in this sports equipment storage.

Did he realize Konoha wanted to capture him? Did he realize she intended to press the reset switch, to terminate his temporary revival? —That said, did the fake Haruaki understand his own body's structure? No, even if he was not aware of his identity as a doll, he probably could still sense danger instinctively.

Putting aside theories for now, the current problem was that he intended to flee.

Judging from the school's current situation to this point, miraculously, the fake Haruaki had not committed crimes against any of the normal students, hence an uproar had not occurred yet—But one could not say about the future.

There were probably still some female students remaining in school. If he were to escape, the fake Haruaki's evil claws were going to assault them. He would forcibly push them down and lick their navels. With that, it would be the end of Haruaki's school life. Even if they explained that an imposter did it, no one would possibly believe them. Even if the superintendent and his staff stepped forward to provide guarantees, there was no way to control the preconceived impressions left in students' minds—

In other words, for the sake of allowing Haruaki and her to have a happy school life henceforth, Konoha absolutely must not let the fake Haruaki escape right now.

However—Konoha secretly bit her lip.

Just as she found out just now, this guy possessed superhuman physical capabilities. Furthermore, he was closer to the window that offered an escape route. Concerned about his appearance, she was unable to attack directly. Under these conditions, was she able to stop him from escaping—? To be honest, she only had fifty percent certainty.

(In that case... I must try out everything I can do...!)

Having decided, Konoha racked her brain. In order to ensure that the fake Haruaki could not escape from here, to resolve this incident, what was she able to do?

That was... That was—

(A-Although it's very embarrassing... I have no choice but to go ahead!)

Staring wide-eyed suddenly, Konoha then—

Forcefully lifted the hem of her uniform and said:

"Haruaki-kun, I-look! Please look at my navel! It's a navel! Y-You may do as you like!"

"O-Ohhhh...!"

Originally backing away in retreat, the fake Haruaki instantly halted, staring wide-eyed at Konoha's belly. Due to having changed in a hurry, Konoha did not have time to put on a shirt at all, hence her entire abdomen was exposed before his eyes, totally unguarded.

(H-He bit the bait! Judging from what he was doing to those two, just as I suspected, right now, he's pretty much a navel maniac! B-But... this is so embarrassing...!)

She glanced slightly at Fear and Kirika to see them lying powerlessly on the mat, simply looking up at her with utterly confused eyes. If she tried to read even more subtle emotions from their eyes, then there seemed to be doubt due to not understanding what Konoha was doing, worry out of concern for her, anger from denouncing her actions as truly shameless, as well as a realization that she, too, had gone mad.

What an embarrassment—Konoha thought, but it was impossible to explain at the moment.

The fake Haruaki walked slowly towards Konoha.

"Ohoh... Wonderful. Unlike Fear's and Class Rep's, it's a meaty and sexy little hole. Ahhh, may I worship it? May I worship Konoha's wonderfully meaty navel? Ahhh, Lord Navel!"

"O-Of course you may. I am very happy... to receive your praise."

"Really? But until just now, you seemed very angry..."

I must not rouse his suspicions. I must not let him escape. This is a critical moment. Konoha desperate racked her brain.

"That's—that's... Umm, because you left me behind and started playing with Fear-san and the others first! I want to join in with you guys too! So, listen here, don't worry about trivial things, Haruaki-kun, hurry up and play navel games with me! Come here!"

Konoha forced an artificial smile to invite him. The corners of her lips were probably twitching stiffly, but luckily, the fake Haruaki did not seem to notice.

"Ahhh, ahhh, Konoha! Thank you! I knew it, you're the best!"

The fake Haruaki went up to hug her. Despite knowing him to be a fake, Konoha still felt her heart racing a little. Still leaning forward, sandwiched between her breasts, he looked down at her navel. His first step was to examine closely. Quickened breathing. Body warmth.

"Guh, ah...!"

He stared intently. This spot, normally concealed from view, was now currently being examined closely by him in detail, as though being licked. Examined as though being played with. Konoha felt the depths of her body gradually growing hot—Nevertheless, she had not forgotten what she was supposed to do.

With natural movements, she caressed his head. Obviously murderous intent had to be suppressed, but she must also prevent him from discerning her other intentions. On the surface, Konoha disguised the motions of her hands with tender affection, presenting them as merely biological reactions—But in actual fact, she was searching desperately.

(The reset switch... Where is it?)

While stroking his hair, she continued to search. Then she checked above the ear, the root of the hair, the back of the head—But Shiraho had already confirmed using a baseball bat, so it could be skipped, right? But just in case, Konoha checked again.

"Hmm~ Hoho. Well, Konoha, I'm going to touch now..."

"Ah! Okay, please—mmm..."

Not the head? The fake Haruaki's fingers were poking her belly, causing Konoha's body to shake intensely. But not yet. Going as far as to use her bosom to envelope his downwards moving head, she spread her arms to hug him tightly. Unless she did that, she would be unable to touch his back—but of course, his muffled voice coming from her cleavage was making her sense of shame almost about to explode—But he's a fake! What I'm holding is the fake's head, it's just like tightly hugging a body pillow with Haruaki-kun's photo stuck on it—Konoha convinced herself desperately, trying her utmost to endure.

She must not let him discover that she was searching for the switch. Once his suspicions were roused, he might escape again. Hence, using her own body as bait, Konoha continued to search for the reset switch on his body

during this time. While enduring the perverted stimulation on her navel, she continued to search.

"Ha, ah... Heah..."

Locked in mutual embrace with the fake Haruaki, Konoha had her chin resting against the top of his head, hence she could see Fear clearly. Like a fish, Fear's lips were opening and closing repeatedly.

"Y-You... why? Too... T-T-T-T-Too shameless...!"

Of course, Konoha was unable to explain the whole story. It would alert the fake Haruaki.

This was strategy. It must be done like this. Because there's a reset switch on his body which I'm looking for—thinking no matter how small the chance, Konoha hoped that Fear and Kirika could understand her intentions, hence she repeatedly blinked at Fear to convey her meaning. I understand your minds are in turmoil, but please stay still—It would be even better if she could express her message in Morse code, but of course, neither she nor Fear nor Kirika had learnt it before.

Seeing Konoha blink, Fear dramatically widened her eyes and straightened her back. Did she get a vague sense of Konoha's meaning? However, Konoha's relief only lasted but an instant—

"Uwah... Oh...! I can't believe you lifted up your clothes to accept shameless behavior, and you're even seducing him shamelessly! I-In the end, you even blinked with pride to emphasize your happiness! C-Cow Tits, you... I never imagined you to be this kind of person. I can't believe you're one to lose your mind from pleasure, this is totally stupid...!"

"No, Fear-kun, you can't blame her. It was the same for me, had it continued, who knows what would have resulted. So enviable... No, I'm not envious at all, rather, what a shame..."

Placing her hand on Fear's shoulder, Kirika shook her head with a pained expression. Normally, Kirika surely would have noticed Konoha's intent—But currently, her mind must be suffering from an intense blow. Definitely, even Kirika had no idea what she was saying herself.

(Damn it... In any case, before these two take some kind of weird action...!)

Where? Where exactly is this switch?

Konoha sped up her search of the fake Haruaki's body. Nothing. Then her only choice was to advance to the next area.

"Mmm... Hey, Haruaki-kun, would you like... to lie down and play...?"

"Yeah, you're so right, of course! As expected of Konoha, you're willing to let me do as I want! That's why you're the best, Konoha! Okay, let's lie down there! Let me look at that part of Konoha's, let me look even more!"

Konoha pushed him down from their posture of mutual embrace and rolled together on the ground. For just an instant, Konoha seemed to see Fear and Kirika make faces resembling Edvard Munch's *The Scream*, almost looking like they were saying: "Lying down—! Are you planning on letting him touch even more thoroughly!?" However, Konoha had no time to tend to the girls. Pretending to fall down, Konoha withdrew her hands and started to touch the front of his body. Was the switch on his chest? Or flank? Neck? Perhaps the navel? The fake Haruaki was lying on top of her, tracing his fingers in the vicinity of her navel, causing her to tremble incessantly, but she could not stop him. If the switch was not on the upper body, then it must be on the lower half. As though engaging in a battle of ground skills in judo, Konoha skillfully swapped positions with the fake Haruaki, using movements that could be explained away as "loving caresses," she slid her hands over all parts of his body, pressing each of them lightly. Where was it? Calves, knees, thighs... However, the more she checked, the more Konoha felt the anxiety in her heart expand.

(W-Why can't I find it...? W-Where else? What's left?)

The answer was obvious. Now was also not the time for hesitation.

Making her decision, Konoha reached to touch the last remaining spot. Described delicately, she was searching his entire lower abdomen. This is a fake. It's not him, neither is it human. So this isn't anything, nor is it an experience—Konoha convinced herself this way. However—

"Oh... Haha, Konoha, you're doing it a bit too hard. You're allowed to touch, but please be more gentle."

"I-Impossible!"

Konoha was stunned.

Shocked, she withdrew her hand and reflexively reached for another spot—Then she froze.

There was nowhere else she had not investigated yet.

Her hands had already touched every place she could think of. And she had exerted a certain level of force, pressing down. She could not possibly have missed a spot. In other words—

Why? She had clearly checked every part of the fake Haruaki's body.

Yet she could not find the reset switch anywhere.

(Why...?)

Impossible to comprehend, impossible to accept. Was the information given by Shiraho's customer wrong? Then which part was wrong? Which part was correct? What should she do now?

Predictions and plans failing, Konoha's mind was plunged into chaos. Using this opportunity, the fake Haruaki pinned her body down with his weight. Haruaki's face was right before her eyes. Whispering in her ear was also Haruaki's sweet and gentle voice—

"So... I should also lick your navel clean, Konoha. Don't worry, I'll take care of your navel for a lifetime. I'll make you very comfortable, with very gentle movements as well, so..."

The fake Haruaki's mouth gradually approached Konoha's belly. His breathing blew against her skin and the exposed navel. She could also feel his warmth under her bosom. Konoha shook from the very depths of her body.

(Ah, hold on... No good, no good, clearly no good... But...)

What should she do next? However, the warmth of his breath was invading the gaps of her confused consciousness while her brain instantly boiled. Her body was unable to exert force. The fake Haruaki's face moved in even closer. Extending his tongue, he gradually drew near.

(I have to endure... But what next... after enduring? What's the next countermeasure, what countermeasure can be taken—Ahhh, wait, I'm still thinking, hold on first—)

However, he did not wait for her. It was as though he was saying that this action itself was an important ceremony for branding Konoha's body with his own mark.

Hence, Konoha shut her eyes tightly.

Just before her navel was about to experience the moisture of his tongue—

"I originally planned to go home directly. But despite appearances, I do feel slightly responsible to some extent, rare enough as it may be."

"Me too, on this rare occasion... I personally... umm... feel that punishing you is necessary—! So, this ends here! Obey!"

The saviors suddenly rushed into the sports equipment storage. Shiraho and Sovereignty. With a wave of his hand, Sovereignty caused the fake Haruaki to straighten his back completely and retreat as though bouncing away, just as his tongue was about to venture into Konoha's navel. While groaning, his body stopped moving.

Seeing Sovereignty nod with satisfaction, Konoha sat up and exhaled in relief. Oh right—despite looking identical to a human, this was a doll after all. Then for Sovereignty who held absolute authority over all dolls, the power of "domination" could not fail to take effect.

Oh my, finally with this—Just as Konoha felt a great burden lifted off her shoulders...

The two girls, who still had no idea what was happening, stuck in absolute confusion, finally sprang into action. As though saying "how could we do nothing," they took action.

"I-I don't quite get it, but now is the chance—!"

"That's right! «Tragic Black River»!"

The two girls finally got up from the mat and began to punish the fake Haruaki instinctively. Kirika extended the cursed belt and wrapped it around Haruaki's head from behind, pulling him backwards. On the other hand, Fear pounced on him from the front.

Then Kirika's belt pressed the nose of the fake Haruaki.

Sitting astride the fake Haruaki's chest while he was lying on the ground, Fear pointed at his nose with her finger—

Simultaneously, they said:

"Y-Yachi, your behavior today is totally unsightly! Perhaps there may be extenuating circumstances, but you should at least explain clearly...
A-Anyway, you must behave more seriously!"

"That's right, damn shameless brat! Although you're quite shameless normally, today's is way over the limit! I forbid all shameless behavior from you completely! I'll curse you!"

While maintaining a pose with her arm extended, trying to stop the two girls, Konoha felt cold sweat dripping down.

"Ah—..."

What should she do now? Somehow, she felt that the final situation had become very troublesome.

After that, things actually did turn out very troublesome.

"To think that this Yachi is a fake... Even if you say that, it's still very difficult to believe..."

Saying that, Kirika examined the fake Haruaki who was sitting on the floor of the storeroom. Due to Sovereignty watching him, he was unable to escape so they currently did not impose severe restraints on the fake Haruaki's movements. Shifting his bottom, he swiftly backed away.

"Eeek—! Please don't come near me! For a pretty girl like Class Rep, if you bring your face this close, my heart will... I-I can't look at you directly!"

"P-Pretty...? Nuho, absolutely ridiculous... However, it's quite refreshing to see this kind of Yachi. I never would have expected this... Nuhohoho."

Nodding repeatedly with a serious expression like an observer, Kirika could not suppress her giggling.

At this moment, Sovereignty knelt down with her knees slightly together, meanwhile examining the fake Haruaki.

"It's probably because they both pressed the switch at the same time and said almost the same thing. It could have resulted in a multiplied effect, which caused this. Now he's become super serious and feels very improper about doing depraved things to girls."

"W-Wahhhhhh! Sovereignty, you have to be more careful, oh no, remember that you're wearing a skirt! Also, the chest as well! Your clothing

is so loose, I'm almost getting a glimpse inside! Too dangerous, sorry, I'm shutting my eyes!"

"Uh... Although the implications are opposite to when I said this earlier, I'm currently a boy!"

"It's still the same! Ahhh, why is everyone so unguarded? You need to have more of a sense of shame..."

The fake Haruaki was covering his face, shaking his head repeatedly. Clearly he was currently devoid of an evil nature—But why? There a feeling that everything was a big mistake. Also a kind of guilty feeling.

Nevertheless, he was just a doll after all, no different from a robot acting according to programming—Just as Konoha was persuading herself in this manner, the fake Haruaki turned his gaze towards her to escape the unguarded Sovereignty.

Oh... Ahhhh...! With a look as though he had seen something despairing, he said:

"No way... T-Too improper—! Konoha! How could you look like this!"

"Eh? Umm, I'm just the same as usual, my uniform is definitely buttoned..."

"It's already gone beyond that level, it's totally visible, your bulging is too obvious! If other boys looked at you like this, goodness knows what's going to happen. Can't you be slightly more considerate for us!? Rather, it's making the viewer embarrassed... Also, your skirt's too short! Argh, how can you stand there so nonchalantly in such a dangerous state? Too scary, too scary, girls are really too scary...! Why didn't I enroll in a boys' school? A-Anyway, cover up with this first!"

With a rustle, the fake Haruaki covered Konoha with a tarp. Because this came totally out of the blue, Konoha had no time to resist at all. Just as Konoha was covered entirely like a ghost doll and her figure obscured—"Phew~" He finally breathed a sigh of relief in satisfaction.

At this moment, Konoha heard laughter in contrast.

"Kukuku, uheeheehee! I see, thanks to this guy, it's proven that Cow Tits' existence itself is shameless! Hello, the embodiment of shamelessness! Haha, r-recklessly using an ugly cow's body shape to seduce men, that's something only sluts would do, so why don't you simply take this chance and start going to school all covered up like this from now on... Ufufu!"

Fear jeered while chuckling to herself from the bottom of her heart. How infuriating. A slice instantly appeared in the tarp that the fake Haruaki had placed over her. Apparently, sword energy from her hand had escaped. How displeasing.

In any case, just as Konoha was about to throw the tarp at Fear as a declaration of war, the fake Haruaki looked at Fear this time.

"Oh? A-Are you trying to express your opinion about what's shameless about me too? This is expected. Totally unlike Cow Tits, my whole body is full of charm from head to foot, a perfect lady giving off brilliant radiance like that of gemstones! However, I won't accept a tarp attack!"

After the slightly guarded Fear and the fake Haruaki stared intently at each other—

Haruaki breathed a sigh of relief and nodded, saying:

"Yes, Fear is Fear. Always so energetic, I think it's great."

"Hey—!? Hold on a sec! It's almost like you're saying you didn't feel anything sexy about my body at all! There must be something at least that makes you flustered, causing your heart to race!"

"Ara ara, Fear-san, isn't this lovely? To think that even this excessively serious fake version of Haruaki isn't afraid of you, tell me exactly which part of you is ladylike...? Ohohoho!"

"Wait, Fear-kun, if you pounce and press the switch on his nose again, it'll be problematic! You have to control yourself!"

"Kirika, you let go of me! I'm going to make this contemptible fake understand what's the truth of this world!"

Amidst this chaos, Shiraho exhaled deeply.

"Your farce have gone on long enough... In any case, Sovereignty, stand at attention."

"Eh? Okay, sorry, did I do something wrong...? Shiraho, please don't be mad..."

Sovereignty contracted his shoulders and timidly stood at attention. Shiraho then said:

"Not you, the doll!"

"Oh, I-I guess that makes sense~"

Sovereignty scratched his head and made the fake Haruaki "stand at attention." In any case, with Sovereignty present, sealing the fake's movements was totally easy. However—

"Umm... Regarding the reset switch, I haven't been able to find it anywhere on his body."

Pouting, Konoha informed Shiraho. It was due to that piece of information that she had to suffer through all that. Offering herself to prevent the fake from escaping, enduring the shame and humiliation of having her navel played with while desperately searching his body.

"Hmph, if you were searching for the switch, you should've said so earlier. I was thinking that Cow Tits had finally fallen into the dark side of shamelessness... Because you lifted your clothes by your own will, that's absolutely abnormal in the head!"

"I was totally unable to explain given the circumstances at the time! Speaking of which, you two clearly did not notice what I was signaling with my eyes, how dare you say that..."

"Well, hmm—Konoha-kun, I'm truly sorry. Because the situation then was absolutely ridiculous, even my mind was not working properly."

Fear puffed out her chest arrogantly while Kirika replied apologetically. Then Shiraho tilted her head in puzzlement.

"No switch? Really?"

"Really."

"Hmph... Although I don't really think that man lied... Then what exactly is going on?"

Seriously, for what did I put in so much effort—Konoha sighed deeply inside her mind.

It was unknown whether the information was faulty or some other reason, but since the reset switch could not be pressed—Their only choice was to keep the doll immobilized by maintaining the current situation, then wait for forty-eight hours to pass. The doll might still escape if they used handcuffs or rope to bind him, so Sovereignty must be asked to stay with them for now...

"Whatever, let's put that aside for now."

Just as Konoha was thinking over these matters, Shiraho walked towards the fake Haruaki. Arms crossed, she stood right in front of the fake Haruaki. Probably because Sovereignty was controlling his expression as well, the fake Haruaki could only stare blankly at Shiraho.

"Shiraho-san? What are you doing..."

"Yes, don't mind me. I just remembered something I ought to do."

"Ought to do... What's that, Shiraho?"

"It's very simple. Indeed, exceedingly simple."

Shiraho glanced slightly at everyone. Her expression made them all tremble, their backs shuddering from instinctive fear.

Because she was smiling tenderly.

Next, Shiraho took a step towards the fake Haruaki with her left foot.

On the other hand, her right foot pulled back like firing an arrow—

"Indeed, although it's something so simple that I believe there's no need to explain... To this thing that had touched, groped and hugged my Sovereignty, I've only punished him with nothing more than a strike with a metal bat! Hence, in any case—for a perverted man's perverted behavior, in order to vent the greater amounts of wrath in my heart, I will punish him like this!"

Then her right foot shot forward to deliver a powerful kick. Like a female soccer player taking a free kick, Shiraho's foot flew forward at a perfect angle—

Thud! Accompanied by a dull sound, she struck the target.

Using the soccer analogy, a very correct location was struck precisely.

In other words, she struck the surface of a spot bearing resemblance to a ball's shape.

"Eeek—!? Haruaki-kun...!? Oh, there's probably no need to worry, but this sight is still very worrying!"

"Muu, this attack must hurt a lot."

"I-It sounds very painful. Although it's absolutely ridiculous, it's probably more painful than we can imagine..."

"I understand, I understand very well... S-Shiraho has turned into a violent superhero—!"

"Fufu—fufufufufu! Ufufufufu! Oh?"

Shiraho suddenly cocked her head. Konoha and everyone else also watched the scene.

Due to the kick's impact, the fake Haruaki's body had floated up slightly then fallen down on the storeroom's floor.

Next, his body began to twist and transform. His clothing gradually stuck to his body, fading in color and his skin's texture changed.

Several seconds later, left on the its original location was—

A child-sized doll that resembled a wooden mannequin.

The whole group exchanged looks with one another speechlessly. Why did it suddenly return to its original form? After moments of thought, Konoha came to a realization.

"Oh, could it be that... the reset switch isn't in a place that can be pressed normally, but instead somewhere inside the body that cannot be touched unless you give it a violent impact like what Shiraho-san did just now...?"

"I-I see. Indeed, if the reset switch were located somewhere easily accessible, after transforming, the doll might bump into it by accident and return immediately to its original form."

"Muu~ This girl Shiraho, she must have figured out the answer, right?"

"As expected of Shiraho, that's amazing—! But how did you know that's the location? Was there any hint? Hey hey, hurry and tell us—"

Everyone looked at Shiraho.

Still showing fury on her face, she was looking down at the doll on the floor.

"Oh! Wait! Why did it change back? I'm still angry! I won't be happy until I kick the same spot two or three more times, and not just the lower body, I also want to do this to the upper body—"

The group slowly withdrew their gaze and exchanged glances.

Fear narrowed her eyes and nodded slowly.

"...Bollocks, looks like it was just coincidence."

A moment later, she burst out chuckling.

"Wait! Fear-chan... Ufufufu, don't say anymore, your description is way too conservative. I can't hold it anymore. Ahaheeha!" Sovereignty suddenly collapsed on the spot, shuddering all over, rolling with laughter.

Fear's face was filled with surprise. As though infected by Sovereignty, Kirika went "mmph!" and covered her mouth as though remembering something, turning her face away to snicker secretly. On the other hand, Konoha dryly gave a stiff laugh, sighing deeply as though feeling exhausted from the bottom of her heart—

How should one put it? In all sorts of ways, it was inexplicably difficult to feel relieved.

But in any case, with this, the extremely chaotic incident finally came to an end.

Part 8

On the way home, the sun was about to set.

Fear, Konoha and Kirika were pushing a trunk while making their way back. Naturally, inside the trunk was the fake Haruaki who had already turned back into an ordinary doll. The trunk itself was something that Sovereignty had found and taken from the superintendent's office on her own accord. Due to an inexplicably cute sticker affixed on top, it could very well be Zenon's personal belonging. They must make sure it was returned properly afterwards.

While these thoughts ran through Fear's mind, she looked down at the trunk and murmured:

"Anyway... this turns out to be quite a powerful cursed tool."

"Yes. Possessing the ability to transform correctly as well as functions to obey human thought to carry out orders... Thank goodness it was retrieved before someone misused it, I must say. On the other hand, it's also true that we've suffered absolutely ridiculously as a result."

"I second that. But speaking of which, I do feel that he could turn into an extremely useful tool depending on different methods of usage..."

Hearing Konoha say that, Fear went "Hmm" and imagined slightly. She had a point. This time, the whole incident started with Shiraho when she activated the doll with the combination of Haruaki plus perversion, which was how the whole chaotic affair resulted, although for some unknown reason, the navel fetish element was later added. Perhaps without their knowledge, the fake Haruaki had done something or encountered someone, but there was no way of finding out now. All they could do was pray that the victim would not view Haruaki as a criminal and report him to the police.

In any case, the key to this tool was the moment of activation in the beginning. So long as they issued serious and legitimate orders instead of perverted ones like this time, it would be fine. So long as they imagined a Haruaki doing other things. For example...

"That's right, if I activate him while imagining the shameless brat baking rice crackers for me nonstop... Nuho, I'll be able to eat piping hot, fluffy, crunchy, freshly baked, handmade rice crackers any time I want!"

"A Haruaki-kun who only sleeps... That alone seems to allow for wonderful things already... Like sunbathing together, and... and...! Ehehehe."

"Showing that clueless face as usual, something like the Yachi who only smiles... No, that guy is not bad either when he's cooking. Then I can steal his special recipes or cook together—Of course, it has to take place at my home. In that room, just the two of us, dressed in aprons, standing together in the kitchen. A-Absolutely ridiculous. This really is absolutely ridiculous..."

"Gufufufu." The three girls all made snickering sounds while realizing with surprise as they each noticed the other two girls' expressions. Although not to the extent of knowing what others were murmuring about or thinking about—But the imagined things in their minds were probably not that different from her own, Fear thought to herself.

...I won't let anyone get ahead of me.

Fear, Konoha and Kirika exchanged glances silently for quite a while, as though probing one another's thoughts. Then someone started with a nod, breaking the silence with polite smiles and stiff voices as though trying to cover up something, thereby restarting the conversation between them.

"Ha—uhaha. H-However, this is a cursed tool after all, no matter how useful it is, it shouldn't be used!"

"Yes, using it is not acceptable! I suppose it must be sealed away and locked up securely!"

"Th-That's right! Not letting anyone use it, waiting for its curse to lift, that's the best solution!"

The trio nodded repeatedly in agreement, tacitly establishing a three-way pact of non-aggression regarding this doll. Peace definitely originated from everyone taking a step back each. In other words, to these girls, this was akin to disbanding the military and nuclear disarmament. Probably.

While chatting, the group returned to the Yachi residence.

Opening the front door, they found the aroma of what was probably dinner's miso soup wafting gently into their nostrils. Naturally, this aroma was not the only thing greeting them—

"Oh, welcome home! Eh? I can understand that Fear went to supplementary lessons, but why are you in uniform as well, Konoha? Did you go to school? Oh right, Class Rep, welcome—Even you're in uniform as well? Eh? Is today really Sunday? Did I remember wrong?"

"Hmm~?" Haruaki cocked his head in puzzlement. A harmless and gentle face. Despite clearly being a boy, the apron suited him very well. The dinner aroma drifting from the kitchen. Although these details were so commonplace, they instilled a surge of warm comfort in people's hearts.

The trio secretly exchanged glances and laughed at the same time.

"Haha, what a totally laid back guy."

"Now that's the real person, totally genuine."

"It's Haruaki-kun as always. Just as expected, this Haruaki-kun is still the best."

Fear could not help but think, although the fake was too shameless at the start which was troubling, if Haruaki were to become like the fake's final state, completely uninterested in or repelled by shameless things, that would be hard to handle as well. So ultimately, his usual self was the best.

"Hmm, the Haruaki who normally engages in a suitable level of shameless behavior is just right. However—Don't you get the wrong idea. Although I may say that, it doesn't mean that I permit you to do shameless things! It's just that suitably shameless behavior can be resisted with suitable punishment, that's the only reason why I'm saying this! If you engage in excessively shameless behavior, prepare yourself for harsh punishment far beyond what you can imagine! However, umm, I think Shiraho's type of punishment is definitely going too far!"

Fear pointed a finger straight at Haruaki as she spoke.

Konoha and Kirika also seemed to be going "well said" in agreement, their shoulders shaking with giggling.

"Huh~? What are you suddenly talking about? I'm totally lost here!"

Hence, still totally unaware of what had happened throughout the course of today, Haruaki inclined his head in puzzlement, showing an almost unprecedented expression of perplexity that one could not help but wonder if the imposter was able to imitate successfully or not.

Afterword

Hello again, I am Minase Hazuki. This volume is the unexpected second coming of a short story collection! However, since the individual short stories are a little heavy on content, for C³ at least, this volume could be considered quite thick indeed. As a result, there aren't too many pages for me to write... So let's get started! As is customary for a short story collection, here are brief explanations of each short story, starting now~

Nubowa Disappearing in the Steam

Congratulations to Un Izoey for becoming a regular member of the cast, so in this short story, I tried to put the spotlight on her. Also, I actually wanted to write a scene about Haruaki and Sovereignty taking an embarrassing bath together way back in the Sovereignty short story earlier, but limited by length, I was forced to give up tearfully.

Bloody Chronicles of Demon Blade Muramasa

The recently unfortunate Konoha-san is the main character here. Just as mentioned in Volume 3, this setting was decided a long long time ago. But of course, alcohol must not be served to those under the age of twenty! Since Konoha-san is already an old lady, hundreds of years old, it's permitted... Oh no! Murderous intent!?

Beauty and the Beast?

Shiraho is the main character here. This story could be considered the counterpart to Volume 7's Sunday Is a Good Day for Stalking. I really enjoyed myself thinking up the two teams' answers for the whiteboard question and answer segment. But looking at Fear's pair, I really can't help but think: "You two should really learn to get along!"

Snow-Melting Population Density

This short story happened to be published in the magazine during the same time when the anime started its broadcast run, so I tried to write in a more subdued and conservative manner as an experiment. That weapon of Kuroe's... It's probably ordered specially from somewhere like America, right...

Art Thou Haruaki? -Imitation of Life-

This is a newly written short story. After the cat ears last time, I guess this is the second installment of the "Fun-Filled Cursed Tools Series" that cannot appear in the main story. I think I kind of overdid it a bit. Oh well, whatever, new stories written for SS collections are like festivals! (←Really?)

So, since there's not much space left, let me put in some acknowledgements! Illustrator Sasorigatame-sama, editor-in-charge Yuasa-sama, manga artist Akina Tsukako-sama, every staff involved with the anime, every voice actor and every reader. As C³ progressively exhibits an ever-increasing multifaceted nature, I've come to realize more concretely than before that this story really only reached this far thanks to everyone's power. I am truly grateful to every single one of you!

Well then, the next volume, C³ XIV, will return to the main story... In a rare instance, the previous volume ended on a "To be continued..." kind of note, so I will work my hardest to bring the next volume to everyone as quickly as possible! See you next time~

Minase Hazuki

References

1. ↑ Kotatsu(炬燵): is a low, wooden table frame covered by a futon, or heavy blanket, upon which a table top sits. Underneath is a heat source, often built into the table itself. Kotatsu are used almost exclusively in Japan, although similar devices are used elsewhere.<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kotatsu>
2. ↑ Seaweed sake(わかめ酒): wakame-zake is a manner of consuming alcohol from a woman's naked body. The woman closes her legs tight enough such that the triangular region between the thighs and the pubic region form a cup where the man drinks from. The name comes from the notion that the woman's pubic hair in the sake looks like soft seaweed(wakame).
3. ↑ According to the sequence in the Chinese zodiac, the Year of the Tiger is followed by the Year of the Rabbit.http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_zodiac
4. ↑ Youko(陽子) and Kurako(暗子): the first character you(陽) in Youko means sunny while kura(暗) in Kurako means dark.

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